Cultural Combinations in Japanese Art: The False Dichotomy of Buddhism and Shintō

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Abstract

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Meiji regime (1868-1912) of Japan declared a mandatory separation of indigenous deities from Buddhist figures. The Meiji government sought to use indigenous rituals, instead of Buddhist rituals, to legitimize its power. It thus codified these beliefs as a national religion, today referred to as Shintō (神道), to emphasize their autonomy. Yet, in spite of its efforts to isolate these beliefs from all others, Japanese spirituality still bears traces of “extra-cultural” religious ideas. This is the result of a long history of religious syncretism (hybridity) in the region. An understanding of the geographic history of religious exchange between Japan and nearby countries, yields a necessity to reexamine the notion of a “pure” Shintō that is completely separate from not only Buddhism, but also from other spiritual traditions.

This project was an interdisciplinary survey of Japan’s history of religious syncretism from the fourth to sixteenth century. It focused primarily on Shintō’s relationship with Buddhism, which has had a substantial impact on Japanese political and social history. It sought to demonstrate that the close interactions between Shintō and Buddhism throughout this history resulted in their now inextricable quality. This interconnectedness is evident in the art historical developments that were concurrent with these interactions. For the purpose of this project, particular attention was given to developments in Japanese sculpture and painting as evidence of the broader narrative of Shintō-Buddhist syncretism. Works under both categories affected their contemporary religious climates by promoting the exchange of religious ideas among the general populace. The Edo Period (c. 1600-1867) folk painting tradition known as Ōtsu-e was studied as a prime example of this non-elite syncretism. Its existence in the realm of folk art, and therefore in the realm of the common people, validates it as an example of popular syncretism.
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Introduction

The phenomenon of religion is understood to be one of the most intimate to the human being. It lives in the deepest realms of the human psyche. Moreover, its influence stretches from the habits of the individual to the progression of politics and societal development—calm or tumultuous a development that may be. Religion often acts as a defining force for nation-states. Its effects are so pervasive that none, not even the individual who claims no association, can escape it.

As the focus of this paper, the definition of religion needs to be given consideration. What is religion? What is the nature of it? It is many things, all of which serve important purposes for various groups of people. It is a unifying force that can bring together minds, helping people to put aside their differences. However, it is also a force which can be abused to incredible extents, resulting in situations where those differences are foregrounded. Religion can and has been used throughout the whole of history to control large masses of people through the rhetoric of difference and the enforcement of fear. It is something which can inspire great violence in even the most unsuspected places. Religion is a force which penetrates the most internal parts of the human psyche, and as such, has a profound impact on the human race.

The influence of religion can be seen very clearly in politics. Since religious thought starts at the level of the individual, those individuals who gain power in a society ascend the stage with their thoughts in a state of validation. With their increase in power, they are allowed to thread their religious thought into their public creations. Here, the example of legislators can serve as a useful analogy. A legislator with firm religious convictions, developed and encouraged from their youth, will create laws that exhibit religious interference in matters of the state. This will occur no matter how objective said legislator claims to be, because of the near impossibility
of separating religiosity from thought. The relationship that the individual develops with religion is of a kind that penetrates the boundaries of the conscious mind, attaching itself to the most essential of unconscious thought processes, and resulting in legislation slanted by religious bias.

Even when lawmakers do not realize it, those with strong religious conviction do indeed produce things which evidence their religious beliefs. It is through this persistence of religiosity at the upper rungs of the societal hierarchy that religion is able to weave itself into the everyday interactions of the common people. Evidence of its influence is seen in the social activities and actions of people outside of the realm of politics, including art and architecture. Art and architecture serve as physical expressions of the effects of religion on informal life. Both these methods of visual/tactile craft and religious practice have been vital activities of the human species since prehistoric times; the two have constantly intermingled throughout history, influencing one another in perpetuity. This is supported by archaeological and art historical evidence.

Archaeological research has yielded many examples of ritual implements—objects used by earlier peoples in their religious rituals—found sometimes in artificially arranged natural sites, or in rudimentary architectural creations. Stonehenge is an example of an artificially arranged natural site that scholars have delineated as a location focal to religious practices. This structure, estimated to have been created in 3100 BCE, is a circular arrangement of monumental stones. The purpose of creating such a structure could not have been for domestic accommodations, so its existence as a place of meeting must be considered. The purpose served by the structure has changed over the millennia. In the present day, it serves as a site of tourist intrigue, as well as one for the religious festivals of Neopagans and Druids from the United Kingdom and abroad.
Clearly, Stonehenge is a structure which has maintained its significance for thousands of years. Its initial creation in prehistoric times was for religious purposes, and its current, non-tourist usage is also for religious purposes. In spite of the great span of time that has elapsed between its creation and the present day, the religious function of the structure, and furthermore the religious interests of humanity, have not failed. Religion therefore must function as something greater than what is experienced in the conscious mind. It must be an essential aspect of human existence, one that may even be indicative of a transcendent quality of the human being. It is this idea upon which many religious traditions are founded.

Otherworldly (transcendent), super-conscious experiences are the basis for a number of religious traditions. Many are founded on legends of “supernatural” experiences between humans and otherworldly beings. Christianity, for example, has Ten Commandments that must be followed by all Christians. These were shared directly with the important figure Abraham by the god Yahweh, prior to the common era. The first prophet of Islam, Muhammad, received his knowledge about the nature of things in dreams delivered to him by the god Allah. In the Bhagavad Gita, a text essential to the religion of Hinduism, the main human figure Arjuna learns directly from the deity known as Krishna. And the Buddha, who will be much the focus of this paper, is held to have maintained his enlightenment in spite of turbulent encounters with an otherworldly being known as Mara, the very personification of “evil” itself.

The experiences of all of these figures are considered vital to the very frameworks of their associated religions. Followers’ interpretations of them, and personal experiences with similar phenomena, also have an impact on the way that these religions function. Individuals will often take the experiences of their peers into consideration in order to improve themselves and
the manner in which they function in their faith communities. Religion therefore functions as a medium through which communities are created, strengthened, and in some cases fractured.

Culture is also unquestionably linked to religion. Culture “creates” religion, which in turn influences culture. Neither one can exist without the other because by their nature they are symbiotic. However, given that culture is not static, religion must also be the same. This is evident in artwork, which can actively portray the constant flux of cultural and religious ideas. The fundamental instability of religion and culture in the realm of the theoretical, is the reason why religious hybridity can arise at the crossing point of two purportedly different cultures.

Much of this project is concerned with the concept of religious hybridity in Japan, which is the result of intercultural, as well as intracultural, interactions. Japan is one of four countries deemed to be the constituents of “East Asia.” Of these four countries (China, Korea, Vietnam, and Japan), China was the one whose cultural and philosophical ideas had the greatest weight. The other three countries adopted Chinese ideas, adapting them to their existing cultures, thus creating this unified entity of “East Asia.” Japan is considered to be the last of the non-Chinese countries to develop a culture that resembled that of the Chinese on the Asian mainland. Throughout its history, Japan has had extensive interactions with China and Korea. These exchanges were what eventually led to the hybridized nature of the Japanese political and religious cultures.

As earlier expressed, China, the largest country in East Asia, was the primary source of the “culture” which eventually unified “East Asia.” Its language, its writing system, political/governmental systems, and artistic styles all influenced the systems in place in Korea, Vietnam and Japan. Chinese ideas were able to travel across East Asia through envoys traveling
by land or sea, maintaining international communications. Chinese culture was seen as “high
culture;” it permeated these other civilizations without unnecessary force.

Some aspects of Chinese culture had more influence than others. Politics and religion are
the two most notable, especially in the case of Japan. The two concepts go hand-in-hand in most
societies, even if those within the country are not entirely aware of it. The United States of
America is a striking modern example. The country claims to be one where religious freedom is
a right to all people under the law. It claims that no one should be subjected to religious practices
which are not their own, because all have rights to their own beliefs and practice. However, the
spectre of religiosity underlines the procession of various things in the country, quietly
undermining the ideas of free religious practice that the country stands for.

One object of consistent debate in contemporaneity is the wording of the country’s
“Pledge of Allegiance.” School children are obligated to recite this pledge on a daily basis. The
wording is as follows:

\[
\begin{align*}
I \text{ pledge allegiance} / & \text{ To the flag} \\
               Of the United States of America; & \\
And to the Republic / & \text{ For which it stands} \\
One Nation, / & \text{ Under God} \\
Indivisible, / & \text{ With Unity and Justice for All.}  \\
\end{align*}
\]

It is a measured pledge, said by all speakers in unison. As it is taught to students from
such a young age, the rhythm remains with them, and they are forced to remember it whether
they would like to or not. Furthermore, they are forced to recite this most controversial line:
“One Nation Under God.”

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1 The forward slash marks here mark rhythmic breaks within the verse.
Who is God to one who does not believe in such a higher power? Does the right of the country to express its “beliefs” trump the rights of parents who choose not to impose beliefs in “God” upon their children? In this case, in spite of what the parents might hope or believe, their children will have no choice but to learn of these matters because of the culture that surrounds them. The dominant culture of the United States is one that has been based in Protestantism since the arrival of the pilgrims in the 1600s.

In the midst of this discussion, the question then becomes: What is culture? In everyday conversation, “culture” is a term used to signify the activities and mannerisms that are particular to a group of people or region of the world. It is something that is discussed as though it is a concrete entity, something which does not change. However, culture is not a static object. It is something that does change constantly. With the advent of intercontinental communication, especially via the internet, culture is becoming increasingly more globalized, and the cultures of geographic places are experiencing constant change. While places, namely countries, may claim that they are bound by a singular culture, internet communications are creating variations on this nationalistic theme.

Interestingly, the term culture—regular though it may be in contemporary discourse—is a relatively new term, having only taken the meaning it carries today during the nineteenth century.2 It is a “reality-constituting term,” one that constructs the lived-in world, all the while being constructed by it. In 1869, when the term was first given its name in an essay by Matthew Arnold, “culture” was represented as an ideology which served to replace religion, as well as an object that resulted from the “perfection” of the elite classes of a society. In 1948, T.S. Eliot redefined the term as something more than the “high culture” that Arnold attached to it. Eliot

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2 Masuzawa 2012, 70.
claimed that culture was a “whole way of life,” which would suggest that it applied to all social strata rather than the highest ones. He also, however, believed it to be something only exemplified in the “traditional society” or the original manner of living in a place. This is especially important for the discussion in this paper, because it is a dangerous thing to assume. When culture is existent not only in cultures, but also in cultures’ communications with each other, how can anyone claim to pinpoint its true location?

If culture is only existent in the “traditional” society, what exists in the contemporary one? Surely American culture, which has changed substantially since the at least partial separation of Church and State, should not be denied the denotation of culture because of how it deviates from what it “originally” was. Tracking the origins of culture, the unquestioned essential qualities which constitute it for what it is, is a nearly impossible task. Who is the observer to classify the nature of an abstract characteristic that stretches over an entire group of individuals? His or her choices would doubtlessly be defined by perspective, which, on its own, can thwart objective discussion. These same arguments can be applied to “religion.” For this reason, throughout this study, when art, religion, and culture are analyzed, the process will be interdisciplinary. It will incorporate a variety of perspectives which will, in turn, be discussed objectively.

“Traditionalism” is an important issue that arises when culture is being discussed. When taken to definitional extremes, this term can denote concepts that suggest cultural purity, a notion that is unlikely to even exist. The geographical origins of the human species should be considered here. If all humans are from a concentrated region in Africa, would that not mean that

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3 Masuzawa 74.
there would be a universal human culture? And if that exists, can there truly be “pure” versions of the cultures that arise among people situated in different geographical locations?

The notion of belonging is a questionable one, especially as the theme of cross-boundary influences comes under consideration. Religion is often linked to nationalistic motives. However, given the complexity of historical interactions between the people of different geographic locations, it is arguable that no culture can claim a religion to truly be its own, and no religion can claim to be one hundred percent itself. Though people may speak of religions as singular, inalterable entities, in actuality, they are not able to exist as such.

It is impossible to claim the “purity” of any religion in the conversation of religious studies. Just as places cannot claim religions to be solely their own—given the continuity of beliefs across locations, which is visible in art—no person can dictate the contents of the category indicated by a signified system of spiritual beliefs. In discussions about Buddhism, it is often the case that monks and scholars express their ideas about different countries’ traditions of the religion in relation to what they deem to be a pure form of Buddhism.4 Buddhism originates in an area of Nepal that was formerly part of India. Because of this, Buddhism is often considered to be “true” Buddhism when it is discernibly linked, practically or philosophically, to the “original” Buddhism of classical India. This assumption is problematic where hybridized, or syncretic, Buddhisms, such as that of Japan, are concerned.

The purpose of this study is to dismantle the notions of pure culture and pure religion which affect perceptions of the validity of syncretic religious practices. Japan is used as the primary example because of its long history of fluidity and variance among religions. The paper analyses the function of religion in Japanese society through an in-depth examination of its

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4 Covell 2005, 16.
syncretic qualities and their appearances in art. This syncretism is greatly evident in the folk arts of the Edo period (1600-1867 CE). The task is to examine the relationship between religion in the Edo period and the lived experience of artists producing popular art objects under the Edo-period government through an interdisciplinary method of research and explication. The study explores three questions. The first is threefold: What is Japanese Buddhism? How does it relate to its Indian precursor and native Japanese practices?

The religious history of Japan is widely contested by scholars and religious practitioners alike. Japan’s native traditions were codified under the universal term “Shintō” by the Japanese government of the nineteenth century, which stressed that they exist separately from any foreign religious influences. Nationalist figures, beginning with Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801), have asserted that the Shintō religion is one with a purely Japanese beginning, an autonomous entity with origins in the Japanese psyche itself. This view is opposed by an equal or greater number of people to those who support it.

In the twentieth century, scholars began to reevaluate the idea of Shintō. This was done specifically in relation to Buddhism, which has arguably been the greatest historical influence on the Japanese religious landscape. Various scholars have approached the task of understanding the profound influence of Buddhism in Japanese society. Kuroda Toshio (1926-1993) was an esteemed scholar of Japanese religious studies. He is well-known for his discussion of a phenomenon that he called “kenmitsu Buddhism” (“esoteric-exoteric Buddhism”), which he used

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5 Graham 2007, 96. It should also be noted here that ‘folk art’ is art created “for the people, by the people.” It represents the ideas of nonelite groups, as opposed to those of the elites who dominate the spheres of art and religion throughout Japanese history.
6 The project includes art history, religious studies and philosophy.
7 Japanese names in this paper are written in the traditional “Surname, Given name” format.
8 Other influences include Chinese Confucianism, Taoism, Chinese and Korean folk religion, and Christianity.
to define the Buddhism of medieval Japan. He asserted that medieval Japanese Buddhism was dominated by eight different schools which closely aligned themselves with the government.⁹ According to Kuroda, these sects understood native religious practices, Shintō, as objects affected by a Buddhist-Shintō combinatory process referred to as “honji suijaku (本地垂迹).”¹⁰

Chapter One of this paper will lay the foundation for understanding this discussion. It will provide an analysis of the origins of Buddhism and its philosophy. Buddhism has its roots in India, which long prior to its conception had birthed multiple schools of philosophy, all of which comprised a rich and sophisticated thought tradition. This history and the influence that classical Indian thought had on the development of East Asian Buddhism is important to consider in discussions of the Meiji period of Japanese history (1868-1912), during which the government attempted a full-scale separation, a purification, of Shintō and Buddhism. In this paper, examples of Indian imagery in Japanese Buddhist art will be provided as evidence of their trans-cultural exchange. Chapter One will also provide a history of Buddhism in Japan. The related developments in religious art will be chronicled in Chapter Three.

During the Meiji period the Japanese government placed great emphasis on the separation of Buddhism and indigenous religious practices. It sought to define the boundaries of indigenous ritual and practice so that they could be propagated in purist forms by the imperial court. This resulted in the creation of “Shintō,” with the nationalist goal of establishing a purely Japanese religion. However new it may have seemed to the people of the time, this claim of the government, this call for the purity of indigenous religious practices, was one that had been

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⁹ The term “schools” refers to branches of Buddhist thought that differ in their beliefs about cosmology and methods of attaining Buddhism’s ultimate goal of spiritual enlightenment and liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth.
¹⁰ Kuroda 1981, 12.
expressed and attempted in centuries past. It raises the question of the possibility of religious purity, especially with the consideration of the history of intricate combinatory patterns of religious beliefs both in and outside of Japan.

Chapter Two will explain the concept of syncretism in detail. It is a phenomenon of great controversy which, notably, could be used to invalidate the traditions of any culture. This paper will strictly avoid that type of analysis, as it seeks merely to illuminate the combinatory nature of culture, which is furthered through the close relation between society and religious thought and practice. This chapter will explore the boundaries of culture through theory, and make sense of the following question: is the host country of a “foreign religion” being colonized or actually colonizing that religion? The answer to this question will be addressed via an analysis of the honji suijaku phenomenon, through which the gradual “amalgamation” of Buddhist figures and Japanese kami (神), or deities, can be observed. This analysis will provide introductory examples of the appearance of religious syncretism in Japanese art and architecture.

Chapter Two will also trace the development of ‘religion,’ a western concept, in Japan, through its historical interactions with other cultures. It is essential to be aware of the implications of using certain terminology in the discussion of religious syncretism (in more than just the Japanese context). This chapter will also explicate the complexity of Japanese Buddhism—more accurately to be referred to as Buddhasisms—so that its plural and fluid nature can be made clear.

There is no denying the profound influence that Buddhism had on Japanese society. However, there is also no denying the process of change that Buddhism went through, as an ideology to be incorporated into the governmental and social practices of the Japanese

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archipelago. The selecting of Buddhist elements to supplement indigenous folk beliefs is suggestive of Japanese spiritual “colonization” of the landscape of Buddhism. The possibilities of the realm of abstraction wherein all of these concepts—religion, ideology, culture—exist are only bound by the reaches of the theorist’s imagination. This paper will attempt to push the traditional boundaries, and grapple with the concepts of perception and syncretism, and the challenges that they present to analyses of art.

Chapter 3 will examine religion in Japanese art directly. It will begin with a discussion of elite art, which is commonly examined in discussions of religious art. This discussion will center around works from the painting and sculptural traditions of the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. *Honji suijaku* was quite prominent during this span of time. Following this section, the chapter will move to discuss the philosophical/doctrinal transition between the fifteenth century and the seventeenth century.

The seventeenth century is marked as the start of the Edo period, within which the delineation between Shintō and Buddhism is blurred irreparably, as is evidenced through the art of the time. The Edo-based discussion will center around Ōtsu-e (大津絵), a type of folk art popular at this time. Ōtsu-e exemplifies cultural/religious syncretism on a fundamental level and is also representative of the politics of religious freedom in its contemporaneity. Ōtsu-e come in a variety of forms and refer to a multitude of subject matter, but for the sake of this paper, only their painted forms relating to religious belief will be considered.

During the Edo Period, the ruling Tokugawa regime forced citizens to adhere to Buddhist religious practice. Citizens were forced to relinquish all non-Buddhist beliefs, and to prove their faith in the Buddhist *dharma* to the government by a variety of actions that included adding their
names to the registers of Buddhist temples. During the subsequent Meiji period, violence and oppression brewed in a negative response to the prevalence of Buddhism in Japanese society, which increased during the Edo Period. The regime of the Meiji period was radically opposed to combinations of Buddhist and “Shintō” ideas. It therefore attempted to wrench the two apart by declaring Buddhism and Shintō as two separate systems of belief which could not interact in any of the artistic, social, or doctrinal spheres. This removal of Shintō from Buddhism and vice versa is known as shinbutsu bunri (神仏分離).

The violence of the Meiji regime throughout this process was unsuccessful in achieving its goal. While it did create two “categories” that were incorporated into the vocabularies of Japanese citizens and non-Japanese onlookers, it could not create an environment where the two were distinct entities. This is evident in the ambiguous nature of contemporary Japanese spirituality. Moreover, the crossovers between Shintō and Buddhism in art are testament to this. The conclusion of this study will look at two examples of contemporary Japanese art as exemplars of historical religious syncretism and contemporary religious ambiguity. These will serve as further support for Chapter 3’s exploration of Ōtsu-e, which exemplify the deeply interconnected, impossible-to-delineate nature of the multiple spiritual traditions that have historically been present in Japan.

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12 Covell 2005.
13 Shinbutsu bunri is defined as the separation, or “dissociation” of Buddhist and Shintō deities (Grapard 241).
Chapter 1: Buddhism

I. Buddhism in South Asia

Buddhism has its roots in an area of Nepal that was once part of India. The fine details of its early history are unknown, but the thought system grew out of a revolution against the contents of the Vedic texts, which had religious precedence during its formative era. These texts had legitimized the reign of the Brahmins—members of the highest caste (social class) in the Hindu varna system—since their inception. 14 The Buddhist movement opposed the Brahmins’ caste system and promoted the notions of equity and classlessness.

In the West, Buddhism is accepted as a religion founded by Siddhartha Gautama, a man from a clan of people called the Shakya who resided in northeastern India. It is from this clan/familial association that his later title of “Shakyamuni Buddha” comes. During the life of the Buddha, Buddhist philosophy was taught orally. Students of the dharma were able to attend the Buddha’s lectures and actively engage in the conversations that he built around his knowledge of it. He encouraged people to think about his propositions on their own, to test them scientifically rather than take what he said at face value. The Buddha, unlike other spiritual figures, did not claim absolute truth in his words. He also emphasized that he was not a divinity, and that what he shared with the world was merely what he had learned in his search for spiritual liberation.

The Buddha’s teachings were not documented until after he died. After his death, his disciples fell into disagreements about which of the sutras (written teachings) were the true sutras, and which meanings were the correct ones. Because they were the ones who codified his lectures into sutras, this level of disagreement resulted in the fragmentation of the Sangha, or

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14 Mohanty 2000, 3.
Buddhist community. *Sangha* therefore became able to work both as a specific term denoting a small group of Buddhists who shared certain beliefs, and as an umbrella term delineating all possible *sangha* that participate in Buddhism.

Though Buddhism is considered a religion in the West, according to Siddhartha himself, it was not intended to be a new religion. The term “religion” refers to a set of beliefs standard to a group of people that usually includes the worship of a higher power and influences the behaviours of those people on a daily basis. Moreover, religious beliefs are often exclusive, and appear to be incompatible with each other. In spite of the Western perception of Buddhism, according to Siddhartha, his teachings were merely intended to liberate others from the suffering of everyday life. Deity worship, in accordance with Buddhist thought, could arguably contribute. Siddhartha’s Buddhism promoted spiritual liberation from suffering and the externalization of power, as well as equity among the societal castes imposed by the Vedic system.

Although little is known about early Buddhism, there is evidence of its geographic expansion south of India into Sri Lanka and above India into what are now Pakistan and Afghanistan. In the mid-300s BCE, the region above India was conquered by Alexander the Great. The consequence of this conquest was a forced interaction between the cultures of the Indus Valley and Macedonia. The Greek cultural/religious presence, with its emphasis on deity worship, remained in this region in the centuries that followed. Yet, in 160 BCE, a ruling Greek king named Menander is said to have adopted non-theistic Buddhism as his religion. The result of this was a conglomeration of Hellenistic, Persian and Indian elements in the local religion that manifested itself in religious art. This resulting syncretic art with its interreligious elements

15 Macedon was a northern kingdom on the ancient Greek peninsula.
16 Holcombe 2017, 73.
then traveled eastward across Asia to China via the Silk Road, having remarkable influence on developing spiritual communities along the way.

Buddhism was able to spread to the Far East through both the Silk Road and maritime trade routes over the Asiatic seas.\footnote{Holcombe 1999, 281.} It gained immense popularity because of its diverse applicability to everyday life. This was unlike the Brahmanic religion, within which Vedic religious beliefs had prohibited sea travel and led to a great fear of the sea among followers of the Vedic religion. As a result, only Buddhist monks and officials—whose philosophies did not instill a fear of the sea—traveled on maritime trade ships. When they reached the geographic region today known as China, they formed their own community.

Interestingly, Buddhism did not become popular in China until a few centuries after its introduction. This was the fault of a fundamental disagreement between Buddhist philosophy and the Confucian philosophy that was dominant in China at this time. While Buddhism asserted that all of life was suffering and the only way to absolve that suffering was to detach from material passions for the pursuit of nirvana\footnote{Nirvāṇa is a term that denotes spiritual awakening and liberation.}, Confucianism taught that happiness could be achieved in one’s current lifetime if one simply followed the heavenly order of the society.\footnote{Holcombe 74.} Later in history, these two conflicting ideas merge together in the formation of the Mahāyāna Buddhist sects that take precedence in China and Japan. This idea will be explored further later in this chapter.

The Buddha’s Life

Buddhism’s travel throughout Asia also resulted in multiple legends regarding Siddhartha’s birth. There are currently two known stories of his life, with the second (and most well-known) having a “magical” quality. In the first story, Siddhartha is born into a Shakya clan
household located in the Indian city-state of Kapilavastu, now part of Nepal. His life is a comfortable one, and in adulthood he takes a vested interest in spirituality. He begins a pursuit for enlightenment through life as a *sramana* or mendicant monk. Mark Siderits explains that the *sramanas* were a relatively new group of spiritual seekers in India at this point in history whose journeys were influenced by the Vedic texts, which define much of the discourse of Hinduism. Being a part of their group is useful for Siddhartha at first, but he eventually decides to pursue the truth on his own. It is this solitude and its consequent uninterrupted thought which leads him to finding *nirvāṇa*.

The second, more popular story of Siddhartha’s life is widely depicted in the visual arts. In this story, he has a miraculous birth. Rather than causing pain to his mother—and accruing negative karma in doing so—he emerges from her side. Afterwards, he begins to walk, and lotus flowers blossom under his feet with every step. Suddhodana, the father of this version of the Buddha, is the king of the region he is born into. Upon Siddhartha’s birth, a seer tells Suddhodana that the child will either be a great ruler or a great spiritual teacher. The path that his life takes will be determined by the sights that he sees in his lifetime. If his eyes meet age, sickness, death, and a spiritual seeker, then he will follow the latter path. Conversely, if he is shielded from the world and ‘not’ exposed to these things, he will become a great king.

Suddhodana therefore does his utmost to prevent Siddhartha from seeing these four things. He ensures that he is surrounded by youth and luxury. He has him married, and Siddhartha’s wife births a male heir. However, although he has a wonderful life, Siddhartha is not content, and ventures outside of the royal house, searching for more. On his adventures outside, he encounters the aged, the sick, the dead, and a spiritual seeker, as predicted by the

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20 Siderits 2012.
21 Siderits 2012.
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He thus goes on to pursue a similar path to the Buddha in the first story. He joins groups of ascetics, hoping to find a teacher that will show him the proper path to spiritual enlightenment. Eventually, he decides to pursue his own path. Then one day under the famous bodhi tree, after years of meditation, he realizes the secret to life. He realizes that all is impermanent, and discovers the eightfold path through which people could be rid of the suffering caused by this impermanence. He then travels around India, eager to share the secrets of the universe that he has unlocked, so that he may deliver other people from samsara, the endless karmic cycle of death and rebirth.

II. Buddhism in China

China did not initially accept Buddhism as a national religion, but the philosophy was still able to interact with some aspects of Chinese spiritual culture. When it was brought to China via the Silk Road in 50 CE, Chinese society was regulated by the social philosophy of Confucianism, which was created by a government official named Kong Fuzi (romanized as “Confucius;” 551-497 BCE). Confucianism asserted that social hierarchy should be used to maintain harmony in society. The social hierarchy it promoted was maintained by the practice of filial piety, which involves people of the lower ranks showing respect and deference to those above them. This hierarchy kept people in boxes from which they were not allowed to leave. Confucianism emphasized that all people should maintain their position in society, and as a result also placed an emphasis on class differences. The philosophy developed during the period of 475-221 BCE and was later popularized to the point of societal dominance in the Han Dynasty (206-220 CE), during which a counter-philosophy known as Taoism developed.

22 It should be noted that no national religion existed in China at this time because of the imperial regime’s practice of religious tolerance.
23 Holcombe 2017.
Taoism was a philosophy that asserted the existence an all-encompassing force called the Tao. It was the antithesis of Confucianism, a spiritual philosophy instead of a social one, and it argued freedom to be the natural state of the human being rather than position in a societal hierarchy. Consequently, it was less popular than Confucianism, which had served the interests of elite citizens for decades, extending even to the interests of the Emperor whom it claimed had the “Mandate of Heaven.”24

It was because of the societal importance of Confucianism that China could not immediately accept the ideas of Buddhism. The two philosophies appeared too difficult to fit together given that the one, namely Confucianism, stressed harmony in the worldly realm, while the other, Buddhism, asserted that worldly concerns were superfluous and unnecessary to attaining the ultimate goal of enlightenment (nirvāna). Moreover, the two fundamentally disagreed on the level of intra-societal relations, given Buddhism’s absolute denial of the class system, regardless of the country in which it existed.25 From the outset, the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, differentiated his dharma from that of the Indian Brahmins by stating that his teachings would be available to all people regardless of their caste (or position in the Confucian hierarchy, in China’s case). The denouncement of class differences was therefore present from the beginnings of Buddhism.

In spite of these philosophical issues, China did eventually accept Buddhism. However, this was not done under native Chinese rule; it was done by the Huns after their invasion and conquest of Northern China.26 In this Northern Chinese society, Buddhism interfered little with Confucian ideas; in the south, it experienced a number of exchanges with Taoism. Buddhist

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24 In other words, the Emperor was like a god on Earth.
25 Harvey 2015, 211.
26 Ibid, 212. The Huns even encouraged the translation of Buddhist texts into Chinese, and China eventually gained the distinction of the greatest library of Buddhist sutras.
terms were even translated into Chinese via their Taoist equivalents from this early period until the fourth century. Under the Sui Dynasty (581-618), the Huns were pushed out of China, and Buddhism was allowed to grow into the whole of the society. During this dynasty, it was “seen as a unifying force that also encouraged good.”

Divisions of Chinese Buddhism – Tien’tai, Ching-t’u, and Ch’an

Chinese Buddhism, like that of most cultures around the world, was divided into multiple ‘schools’ in accordance with the sectarian conflicts that followed the Buddha’s death. These schools were divided by their interpretations of the Buddhist message. They also varied in levels of relation to Indian Buddhism, with some appearing to have been transplanted directly into China from India. It is tempting to assume the boundaries and definitions of these Buddhist traditions as absolute truth, but, in reality, they do not exist with such precise delineations. Robert Sharf asserts that the type of Buddhism codified under the term “Pure Land Buddhism”—which will be central in this paper’s discussion of Japanese Buddhism and its artistic developments—is only one strain of many similar Buddhisms on the Chinese religious landscape. Rather than the singular image that is conjured by its name, the true nature of Pure Land Buddhism is a variant, plural practice. This is due, in part, to the fact that unlike the other schools of Chinese Buddhism, this “category” was not founded by any particular person.

Each of the Chinese Buddhist schools has a line of patriarchs, of historical men who represented these schools and their teachings. The teachings were passed on from patriarch to patriarch, thus creating, in theory, distinct schools of Buddhism. Many schools flourished, but three of the most successful were the Tien’tai (Japanese: Tendai), Ching-t’u or Pure Land

27 Ibid, 213.
28 Harvey, 213.
(Japanese: Jōdō-Shū), and Chan (Japanese: Zen) schools. Each of these schools was eventually brought to Japan by Japanese Buddhist monks who traveled to China to learn from their continental brethren. Their study abroad was mandated by the early Japanese state, which did not deem individuals’ monasticism legitimate unless they were knowledgeable in continental teachings.

_Tien’tai_ asserted that every living being has an inherent Buddha nature and that all things were part of one unifying consciousness. The unifying conscious of _Tien’tai_ can be likened to the _Tao_ or the _Brahman_ of Hinduism, which is a similar unitary phenomenon. _Ching-t’u_ (Pure Land), which is often cited as being founded by the monk Huiyuan (334-416 CE), asserted that all people can be saved by a Buddhist figure known as Amitābha, who reigns over a heavenly realm called the “Western Pure Land,” accessible post-mortem. All people can go to this Pure Land after death so long as they were faithful and chanted the _nien-fo mantra_ (Japanese: nenbutsu), Amitābha’s name, in life. Some later believed that one truly faithful recitation of this chant could result in salvation for the individual.

It should be noted that in the case of Pure Land Buddhism, the figures listed as its patriarchs were not even adherents of the Pure Land Buddhist faith. In fact, the patriarchate of Pure Land Buddhism was a lineage constructed by representatives of the _Tien’tai_ Buddhist school. There was no established institution of _nien-fo_ (nenbutsu) Pure Land Buddhism. Instead, it was kept alive by the traditions of religious pluralism and non-exclusive religious

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30 Sharf 2002.
31 The Western Pure Land often appears in Pure Land Buddhist art. Examples will be discussed in Chapter 3.
32 Sharf 283.
33 Sharf 292.
34 Ibid 290.
practice in historical China.35 People were not bound by any faith; a Daoist, for example, could practice the Buddhist or Confucian religions without fear of repercussions. Furthermore, the ideas of the nien-fo and the Western Pure Land were pervasive. They were acknowledged in all schools of Chinese Buddhism, since rebirth in the Western Pure Land, a place where one could pursue enlightenment without earthly distractions, was highly desirable.36

III. History of Japanese Buddhism

It is often said that Buddhism was “officially introduced” to Japan in the sixth century CE, circa 552. This date is cited because of historical records which record it as the year when the king of Paekche, one of Korea’s three kingdoms from the period of 313 to 668 CE, sent envoys with Buddhist sutras and worship materials to Japan’s reigning sovereign.37

Before this officially documented event, Buddhism was introduced to Japan by immigrants from China who began to filter into the Japanese archipelago prior to the sixth century. According to William Deal, “early southern Chinese immigrants—apparently practicing Buddhists—made their new home in the Yamato region and established a temple.”38 He does not explain the political implications of this activity, but it is possible that these Chinese immigrants were able to establish temples because of their wealth, and the respect they must have received from the people they encountered, given the respect for Chinese civilization among the Japanese people.

The Chinese immigrants, along with Korean immigrants who came to Yamato as well, soon established high places for themselves in Japan’s political sphere by developing kinship

35 These phenomena are also generally referred to as syncretism.
36 Sharf 301.
37 Holcombe 2017, 84.
38 Deal 2015, 20.
groups, or *uji* (氏), that played a significant role in government and the solidification of Buddhism’s foothold in Japanese society. However, in spite of the role that they played, they are not acknowledged in the officially documented account of Buddhism’s introduction to Japan, called the *Nihon shoki*, that was endorsed by the imperial family. This document places the date of Buddhism’s “introduction” at 552 CE. It also details the history of Japan and its extra-national relations, having been written with the aim of creating a history of Japan for Japan. The intent of this historical record was to legitimize the reign of the imperial family. This document “presents a story about the transmission of Buddhism that is part of a larger construct that the imperial family and its supporters were trying to craft in order to legitimate their power” and moreover, this document “treats…Buddhism as an object that can be contained, transmitted, and handed over from one king to another.”

The issue with this, Deal says, is that Buddhism is understood as a commodity, and the complexity of its incorporation into the Japanese religious landscape, and the resulting recombinant forms of religious practice, is undermined. The influence of high-ranking immigrant kinship groups such as the Soga family for example, is also disregarded. Furthermore, in terms of modern scholarship, accepting this view leads to misunderstandings of the intricate elements of Japan’s inter-regional interactions.

It is important to consider the way in which Buddhism was received by the imperial government. Given the geographical intimacy of Japan and the Korean peninsula, it was important for the two nations to maintain a mutually beneficial alliance that would serve them

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39 *Uji* is the Japanese term used to refer to kinship groups that held political power in medieval Japan.
40 Deal 2015, 20. This is especially important to note when artistic developments are being considered.
not only in economic matters, but also in military pursuits. Therefore, it was in the best interest of the sovereign of Paekche to send gifts to the emperor of Japan, and vice versa. What is interesting is the way that Buddhism was seen upon this official share. The emperor and his ‘cabinet’ of officials—which included immigrants from the Soga, Nakatomi, and Mononobe families—were unsure of the legitimacy of Buddhist practice, as well as the effects that acceptance of the foreign Buddhist “deity” (i.e. the Buddha) would have on the emotional well-being of indigenous deities.

The Soga representative Soga no Umako favoured the idea of the government officially adopting Buddhism, but the representatives of the Mononobe and Nakatomi kinship groups did not. The Soga family was connected to Buddhism through some of its continental ties. In contrast, the Nakatomi family was directly “associated with kami worship and other ritual matters.” Therefore for political reasons, it made sense for both of these families’ representatives to promote the arguments that they did, for or against Buddhism, to the imperials.

With this knowledge about the kinship groups’ religious affiliations, it is curious to ponder the connection the Soga family may have had to the influx of Buddhist doctrines after the imperial family agreed to adopt Buddhism as the state religion of Yamato. They had multiple layers of influence. As a high-ranking immigrant family, they bore influence over the immigrant community. Furthermore, their position in government eventually led to their intermarriage with members of the imperial family, which consequently led to their integration into the imperial bloodline and eventual domination of the court.

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41 Interestingly, the Buddha was thought by the prince Shōtoku and Soga no Umako to provide assistance in war if prayed to. They built temples in his name upon victory in battle (Hongo, 44).
42 Deal 2015, 22.
43 Ibid, 21.
As earlier stated, the Soga family was the first family in the royal court to accept Buddhism as their religious practice. They also commissioned the building of the first system of Buddhist temples in Japan, with the temple known as Asukadera at its center (Figure 1).44 This temple system had an accompanying monastic system within which three women were the first renunciants.45 These women received their official ordinations in Paekche, where they completed a ‘study abroad’ in Buddhism.

One of the reasons that Buddhism was eventually accepted was because of its appeal to the high court. As in early China, early Japan was influenced by Confucian ideas that emphasized worldly order. The indigenous religious practices encouraged the pursuit of worldly benefits through deity worship. However many differences there were between this Japanese environment and that which Buddhism suggested Japan cultivate, as in early China, the idea of a Buddhist “heaven” was very appealing.

Buddhism was also accepted because of its potential as an instrument of power. This power materialized in the form of architecture, specifically temples.46 Architecture serves as a physical representation of power in a variety of contexts throughout history. The Soga family’s Asukadera was completed in 596 CE, during the Asuka Period (552-645 CE).47 This temple was built in the style of temples in mainland China, which became the style that distinguished Asuka-period temples in Japan.

As is characteristic in Chinese architecture, the buildings of Asukadera have clay-tiled, upward-curved roofs. The façade of the main building is a dark, natural brown—the colour of the

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44 This building project was led by Soga no Umako.
45 Deal 2015, 31.
46 Deal calls temples “conspicuous symbols of the power associated with Buddhism” that “represented the power of the king and asserted the legitimacy of the ruling elite” (31).
47 Deal 2015. This temple is also called Hokôji and Gangôji
wood used to craft the structure—that is decorated with beige paper screens. Visitors must enter
the temple through sliding doors engraved with hundreds of names in kanji, the system of
Chinese characters adopted by the Japanese before the development of kana.48 These doors are
of a mid-brown hue that contrasts with the darker wood of the rest of the structure. Just in front
of the building, on either side of these doors, are red, rack-like devices with green shelf-like
structures. The pigmentation of these objects, unlike those on the building, is reminiscent of the
green, red, and yellow color schemes used in classical Chinese architecture.49

The latter described qualities of this temple are evidence of cultural transference from
China to Japan. This transfer was also largely influenced by Japan’s communications with
Korea, which served as an intermediary between it and China. The influence of Korean culture
on the development of religious art and architecture in Japan also cannot be ignored.50 The
Asukadera is a Buddhist structure, and as most scholars agree, Buddhism was brought to Japan
in the arms of Korean immigrants and envoys. The deliverance of a system of
philosophical/religious beliefs implies the importation of the sacred imagery (of art or
architectural techniques) belonging to that system to the target country. In the case of Japan and
Buddhism, this cultural amalgamation is seen not only in the context of Buddhist material
culture, but also in the integration of the Buddhist religion and indigenous religious customs.

**Doctrinal Developments in Japanese Buddhism**

The earliest form of Buddhism in Japan proliferated during the Asuka Period (552-645
CE). Buddhism was the product of aristocratic promotion efforts, as explained above with
regards to the Soga and Nakatomi ūji. During this period, Japanese Buddhism emphasized ritual

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48 *Kana* denotes a native Japanese script, the development of which is sometimes credited to the monk Kūkai.
49 Mason 2004.
50 Sadao and Wada, 38.
over doctrine, and kept Buddhist objects—ritual implements and works of art—at its core.\textsuperscript{51}

Following the Asuka Period, the Japanese state assumed primary sponsorship of Buddhism. The state took this position during the Hakuhō Period (645-710 CE), during which the Soga \textit{uji} fell from power. This period also saw various government reforms, including the creation of the \textit{ritsuryō} governmental system, which utilized elements of Chinese governing practices.\textsuperscript{52} Hakuhō Japan was very interested in its contemporary, T’ang Dynasty China, and this was evidenced in not only its government, but also in its art, architecture, and Buddhist practices.\textsuperscript{53}

Following the Hakuhō period, Japan entered the “Nara” period. The Japanese government moved its capital to the city of \textit{Heijōkyō} (presently referred to as “Nara”). This period is often cited as one of the most important periods of Japanese history, where Buddhism is concerned. Artistically speaking, during the Nara period, Japan developed distinct sculptural styles for portraying Buddhist figures.

During the early Heian period (794-1185), Japanese Buddhism grew from an elite, state-centered institution to a one accessible to the entire populace. Buddhism was no longer considered to be a possession of the state, like it was in the Asuka, Hakuhō, and Nara periods. At the start of this period, the emperor Kanmu moved the state capital from the Nara period’s \textit{Heijōkyō} to the city of \textit{Heiankyō} (contemporary Kyōto), which became the location to which Japanese monastics returned from their state-mandated scholarly travels abroad with new knowledge of Buddhist culture.\textsuperscript{54}

The influx of information from the continent brought by these monks led to the development of two distinct lineages of Buddhist religious practice in Japan: Shingon and

\textsuperscript{51} Deal 2015, 28.
\textsuperscript{52} Holcombe 1997.
\textsuperscript{53} Deal 2015, 28.
\textsuperscript{54} Deal 2015, 73.
Tendai. These schools are examples of Exoteric and Esoteric Buddhism. These categoric distinctions were defined by the monk Kūkai, who will be discussed further below. Esoteric teachings are “secret teachings,” and considered to be the words of Dainichi (大日), the Cosmic Buddha. Exoteric teachings, on the other hand, are “revealed teachings” and can be traced back to Shakyamuni Buddha.  

The esoteric Shingon lineage was pioneered by Kūkai (774-835 CE). Similarly to in the Nara period, individuals who wanted to be officially ordained as monks in during this time period needed to pursue further studies in mainland Asia. Consequently, from 746-805, Kūkai lived in China, where he studied esoteric Buddhism (mikkyō 密教) under the tutelage of Huiguo, a master of Tantric Buddhism. Kūkai returned to Japan in 806, and eventually was allowed to “administer esoteric ordination” at the temple of Jingōji. After his death, Shingon split into different sects that each claimed to have his original teachings, similarly to the activity of classical Buddhism after the death of Shakyamuni Buddha.

After the Buddha’s death, the meanings of his teachings were less widely agreed upon. Without him present to explain his meaning, there was ample room for argument and misinterpretation. As a result of disagreements about the meaning of the Buddha’s words, the followers of The Middle Way split into multiple groups. These sectarian groups later segregated themselves again, classifying themselves under such names as the Mahayana and Theravada schools of Buddhism.

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55 Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.
56 Deal 2015, 76.
57 Mason 123.
58 Japanese Buddhisms appear to generally fall under the category of Mahāyana Buddhism, within which Buddhisms incorporate some kind of belief in a divine aspect of the Buddha. Here, it is interesting to note
In contrast to the Shingon lineage, the Tendai Buddhist lineage was of an exoteric nature. Its Japanese sect was founded by Saichō, another monk who studied Buddhism in China in the ninth century. Prior to his work in China, Saichō was ordained at the temple of Tōdaiji, where he began his studies at the age of thirteen. After his ordination, he pursued further study of Buddhism on Mt. Hiei at the famous Tendai temple of Enryakuji, where he specifically studied the writings of Zhiyi, the founder of Tendai Buddhism in China. These writings emphasized the importance of the Lotus Sutra. In 797, three years after Emperor Kanmu made Heiankyō Japan’s capital, Saichō was asked to become one of the ten official priests of the court. He later left to study under a monk from Zhiyi’s lineage in China.

Japanese Pure Land Buddhism also developed under the Tendai lineage during this period. This Buddhist practice involved the repeated chanting of the *nenbutsu* (念仏), an invocation of the name of the Amida Buddha, for the salvation of the practitioner. It was promoted by aristocrats and appealed widely to the masses because its practice did not require extensive amounts of doctrinal study. The Amida Buddha was portrayed in both the sculpture and painting of the Heian period, which thus documented the popular religion that surrounded him. The ideas of Pure Land Buddhism—as well as those of Tendai and Shingon—are also

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that Shakyamuni asserted that he was not seeking to create a new religion, emphasizing that he was not a divine being.

Both Shingon and Tendai had Chinese precedents which the founding monks Kūkai and Saichō were well-studied in.

Deal 2015, 73.

Ibid.

Saichō was seven years Kūkai’s senior, living from 767-822, and returned to Japan just one year before Kūkai (in 805 CE).

Deal 2015, 92.

Doctrinal study was not an option for all classes of people. Forms of Buddhism which placed emphasis on doctrinal study had limited accessibility. It is for this reason that artistic representations of Buddhism are so important in Japanese history. It is only through art that the greater population could learn about Buddhism.

“Popular religion” is a term used to represent the practices of the “common” people, or the practices common across all class divisions in a society (Teiser 1995, 378).
expressed in mandalas, which are visual representations of the Buddhist cosmos that are used in esoteric Buddhist meditations. Examples of these mandalas will be examined in Chapter 3.

Japanese Buddhism, India and Taoism

Medieval Japanese thinkers gave profound consideration to the soteriology of Buddhism. Rather than accept the doctrines of nirvāṇa and samsara as they were, they chose to reexamine both ideas in the context of indigenous Japanese thought and writings, as well as writings from China on these topics. One particularly influential Chinese writing, called the Dasheng qixin lun (大乘起信論), stated that enlightenment could not exist if non-enlightenment were not simultaneously present.66 Japanese thinkers, particularly those of the Shingon Buddhist sect, took this to mean that enlightenment existed in a space which predated the Buddha and the very notion of enlightenment.67

This document is credited to a second century Indian thinker named Asvaghosa, which would explain its extraordinary commentary on “suchness.”68 Fabio Rambelli quotes the document as saying: “The one and true Mind pervades everywhere.”69 This statement evokes two different philosophies: the Vedic tradition of classical India, and that of Taoism in China. One of the most pronounced elements of Taoist philosophy is that of the Tao (“the Way”), which is described as an indescribable force that is inescapably ubiquitous. Laozi, one of the most recognized Taoist philosophers, describes it thusly:

There are ways but the Way is uncharted;
There are names but not nature in words
Nameless indeed is the source of creation

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66 Rambelli 2009, 239.
67 Teeuwen 2000, 96.
68 Rambelli, 239.
69 Ibid.
But things have a mother and she has a name.\(^{70}\) (…)

The Way begot one,
And the one, two;
Then the two begot three
And three, all else.\(^{71}\)

It is clear from these passage, that the *Tao* is a pervasive force, and yet one that cannot be named. Moreover, it is the origin point of all things, while simultaneously being the space in which they dwell. The medieval Japanese interpretation of Buddhist soteriology bears the influence of these ideas. This can be argued on the basis that Taoism is known to have influenced Japanese spirituality—and therefore one of the most intimate elements of Japanese thought—even prior to the advent of Buddhism.\(^{72}\)

The Japanese interpretation of the *Dasheng qixin lun*, as well as the document itself, also exemplify another element of Taoist philosophy: that of the importance of *unlearning*\(^{73}\). The later Taoists believed that in order to understand the workings of the universe, one must forget what one believes to know. In the “pursuit of naturalness,” one eventually is able to achieve that place of “original enlightenment,” within which there are no distinctions, nor are there any hindrances to enlightenment, as it is already there.\(^{74}\) This is akin to the Taoist state known as the “uncarved block.”

The Shingon Buddhists also believed that this “uncarved,” previously enlightened state was linked to the Buddha *Dainichi*. In fact, beings who existed in this state—humans or *kami*—existed within *Dainichi’s* body; this was the justification for their original enlightenment.

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\(^{71}\) Ibid, 95. Verse 42.

\(^{72}\) Hardacre 2016.

\(^{73}\) Shaw 1988, 185.

\(^{74}\) Ibid, 185.
Dainichi is a figure who the Japanese believed was the true originator of the Buddhist precepts/Buddhist enlightenment, of whom Shakyamuni was a mere emanation in a foreign land. Shakyamuni’s eightfold path was considered to be an “exoteric” method by which enlightenment could only be “acquired;” this was considered inferior to the “esoteric” method of union of the Dainichi Buddha which just resulted in enlightenment.75

The justification for the perceived superiority of a native Japanese Buddha came from reinterpretations of myths and folklore concerning the kami.76 When Buddhism reached Japan, the Japanese classified the Buddha as a foreign kami. Deities in early Japan—which, ironically were first referred to as Shintō—were primarily natural phenomena and mysterious happenings that were imbued with consciousness. However, after the coming of Buddhism, the term kami came to encompass more than just these phenomena and occurrences. The notion of kami was reexamined in relation to that of Buddhas and bodhisattvas. In the process of this, kami became further personified, and were anthropomorphized in folklore and art.77

Kami, upon the popularization of Buddhism in Japan, also came to be known as beings who, in spite of being superior to humans, were still implicated in the cycle of death and rebirth (samsara). In accordance with Buddhist philosophy, these beings were now expected to be seekers of enlightenment. Moreover, in theorists’ initial support for the importance of Buddhist philosophy, kami were considered to exist only as secondary “traces” of the Buddhas. This phenomenon is known as honji suijaku. Honji suijaku also led to the development the philosophy of “original enlightenment” in Tendai doctrine,” which related to the kami and Buddhas both. The relationships between kami and Buddhas in terms of honji suijaku are visually represented in

75 Teeuwen 2000, 96.
76 Kami are Japanese deities.
77 An artistic example of this anthropomorphization will be explained in Chapter 3.
sculpture and worship spaces. The theory of this phenomenon will be discussed within Chapter 2, on Syncretism; its artistic manifestations will be utilized in the following chapter on Religion and Syncretism in Japanese Art to ground the theory in material culture.

It is clear that over the course of time and space, Buddhism would undergo changes. The Buddhism of India is not the same as that of China or Japan. However, as the above sections hope to have shown, there are many similarities between the Buddhisms of these three regions. Furthermore, though in all three places Buddhism is defined as a religion separate from the others in its environment, the way that it is shown to integrate into the society evidences a ‘lack’ of separateness. Buddhism becomes conjoined with native religions. The smooth manner in which Buddhist ideas become interconnected with indigenous religious/spiritual practices suggests a permeability of religions. The two draw from one another as the Buddhist philosophy becomes part of a new geographic region. It is indigenized and ‘reimagined’ through a non-Indian lens. The “new” Buddhism that results can be understood as a “difference of the same,” something that still maintains elements of its prior selves.

78 Bhabha 1990.
Chapter 2: Syncretism

I. History of Ideas – Development of ‘Religion’ in Japan

In the discussion about “religion” in Japan, it is important to understand the implications of using the term “religion.” Though it is the term most familiar to westerners, it is not the term that was most familiar to the Japanese before their first cultural interactions with the West. Japanese “religion” as it is called was not systematized in the way that western religion is. It was not divided into the orthodox or the unorthodox, nor was it unified by a single deity. The pre-Buddhist spiritual practices of Japan found union in their uses of ritual and their beliefs in kami, but these things cannot be equivocated to Western ideas of religious belief.79

The classification of Japanese Buddhism and Confucianism as religion and philosophy, respectively, needs also be considered. It seems unnatural to attempt to fit either of these concepts into the square pegs of Western categories. Moreover, it is necessary to accept that non-western cultures may have their own categories for these similar concepts. Rather than trying to force Japanese—or any culture’s—ideas into the dominant designations for the sake of standardization, it would be useful to find universal terminologies that do not encourage the hegemony of certain cultural traditions over all others.

This is important for the reason that, in the Japanese example, the adoption of western categories in the Meiji Period resulted in a large-scale reformatting of Japanese Buddhism, Confucianism, and so forth. In translating the western concept of ‘philosophy’ into the Japanese language, scholar Inoue Enryō created tetsugaku (哲学), a neologism that signified western philosophical matters. The result of this word was a debate about whether Japan’s indigenous

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79 Though not much is known about Japanese spirituality pre-Buddhism, scholars understand there to have been multiple “kami cults” within which groups of people focused their religious practices on the appeasement of certain kami.
‘philosophical’ thought, which was referred to as shisō (思想) starting in the 1920s, could also be included within the definition of that term.\textsuperscript{80} That is to say, the adoption of western categories led Japanese people to question the legitimacy of Japanese ideas.

The imperialist mission of western countries created a world in which the nonwestern was denied legitimacy by western powers. It enforced a dichotomy in which the “West” was deemed more sophisticated in terms of its societal realities. In order to achieve western recognition or to parallel the status of the west, nonwestern countries were forced to “westernize.” This occurred by force, as in the case of the colonized, or by choice, as in the case of Japan. It is interesting that the Japanese government—despite its nationalistic fervor—chose to push intensive westernization, deeming it to be the key to rising through the global ranks.\textsuperscript{81}

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Japanese art underwent changes that led to greater resemblances between it and the art of the west. Impressionism, for instance, was well-liked in Japan, and a school of Japanese artists sought to create works in the impressionist style. Some of these artworks closely resemble that of Claude Monet, to the extent of being nearly indistinguishable from his work. The Japanese fascination with western artistic trends grew to the point where artists who created their work in the native styles were seen as avant-garde, as statement-makers rather than just makers of art.\textsuperscript{82}

\textsuperscript{80} Godart 90. Interestingly, Godart explains that shisō was a term used to refer to more than just Japanese thought.
\textsuperscript{81} All of this is relatable to the commonplace manner in which East Asian history is often discussed. Japan is described almost as the “youngest” child in the region of East Asia. The country’s lack of a written history extending as far back of those of its “siblings,” is part of the reason for this. Still, Japan does have a long history that is discernable at least through archaeological evidence. The furthest back that archaeologists have traced is the prehistorical Jōmon Period (c. 4000 BCE), from which examples of pottery have been discovered.
\textsuperscript{82} Karatani 45.
The Eurocentric stylistic tendencies in Japanese art were widely debated during this time period. Okakura Tenshin was a prominent figure whose controversial opinion was that the entire region of Japan was like an art museum.\textsuperscript{83} He believed Japan to be a place with nothing of its own. Instead, Japan to Okakura was merely a holding cell for the arts and ideas of other peoples. His concept of Japan as an art museum was a doubtlessly harsh assessment of Japanese society. Japan does indeed have its own culture, in spite of the “foreign” elements that it may keep as part of that culture. Okakura’s art museum belief is the antithesis to this paper’s discussion, the point of which is to assert that Japanese culture exists as a unique body of Japanese ideas and foreign ideas. This is the case in other cultures as well, given the inherent “impurity” of the culture concept.

As was explained in the introduction, the concept of culture has a recent history. Okakura’s negative assessment of Japanese culture, therefore, could only have happened through the filtered lens of the western perspective. This lens carried with it western baggage concerning what should constitute a culture, elements that could only be understood through western reference points (e.g. Christianity as the reference point for what ‘religion’). It is important to observe Japanese culture from as objective a perspective as possible. Though at this point in time it is impossible to escape the terminology used to discuss the beliefs, customs and practices of a group of people, it is possible to study those items in relation to each other and the context of their base location.

The development of ‘religion’ and ‘culture’ in Japan was the product of western interactions with the country, but neither its religion nor its culture should be considered through Eurocentric nodes of analysis. However, the impact of this Eurocentricity on Japan cannot be

\textsuperscript{83} Okakura was a student of the Bostonian professor Ernest Fennolosa who “discovered” Japanese art. Fennolosa was the first westerner to look at Japanese art as Art with a capital ‘A’ rather than as craft.
denied. Japan was never colonized, but the harsh interference of western cultures—for example
the American demand that Japan open to the rest of the world in the nineteenth century—
affected the manner in which Japanese culture and religion were conceptualized.

It is important to consider the manner in which Japan is spoken of in discussions such as
this which occur from a western perspective. There is a danger of lowering the status of Japan in
historical analysis as less advanced than the West, or as in need of Western ideas in order to
develop into a civilization. This danger has sometimes been realized in discussions of this
subject matter by Japanese individuals, as indicated earlier in the mention of Okakura Tenshin.
Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835-98), a scholar from the nineteenth century, is an example of an
individual who in spite of his efforts to neutralize the degrading Western dialogue about Japan,
still maintained that Japan needed to make use of some aspects of western modernity in order to
advance. Though he differed from Okakura in that he advocated for Japanese independence
(physically and philosophically), both men added to the imperialist discourse of the dominant
western which emphasized their position in a permanent state of hegemony.

This information about the reception and development of western ideas in Japan is vital
before the concepts of syncretism and cultural hybridity can be examined. It is necessary to be
aware of the hidden caveats in the manner in which the subject matter is discussed in order to
avoid crossing the boundary of scholarly inquiry into the realm of offense. This study attempts to
discuss hybridity on the Japanese religious landscape without diminishing the validity of
Japanese spirituality. All faiths, no matter their manner of ‘organization’ in relation to the

84 Sakamoto 1996.
85 Ibid 116.
dominant religions are valid in some way or another. The plural nature of the religions in Japan is neither a fault nor an advantage; it is simply a reality that must be acknowledged and accepted.

II. Syncretism

Syncretism is a controversial concept in the field of religious studies. The term is used to denote the process that occurs when multiple cultural traditions interact with one another. Some regard it as a negative term that is used to express disdain for religious hybridity; others see it as a term that is inseparable from the colonial history it sometimes describes. However, in spite of its reputation, the discourse around syncretism is still important to understanding the spiritual traditions of various cultures.

The controversy surrounding syncretism comes from the manner in which it was defined during the twentieth century. Religious studies during this time was dominated by theological discussions that were swayed by Christian thought. The involvement of writers’ personal beliefs in their approach to the concept resulted in a written conception of syncretism that was negative, seeing it as something to be avoided.86 This, however, is understandable given the requirements of the Christian faith.

Christianity, similarly to the other Abrahamic religions of Islam and Judaism, requires that its adherents practice it exclusively. Plurality is not allowed; it is seen as an impure approach to religious belief that can lead to eternal damnation. Writers considering syncretism in terms of this theology, at a point in history in which the discourse around religion was very different from contemporaneity, would unsurprisingly see it as a “taboo” concept.87 When religion is considered from a perspective in which the scholar studies it impersonally, this taboo is less

86 Pye 1971.
87 Ibid.
likely to surface. Rather, syncretism becomes understood as a process natural to religions, as they are systems of belief which necessarily incorporate ideas from other systems in order to be understood by their adherents. Religion is something which is automatically plural; hybridity, therefore, exists at the foundation of every system of belief.

**Modern Discourse – ‘Syncretism’ vs. ‘Hybridity’**

The modern intellectual discourse surrounding the notions of cultural hybridity and syncretism is heavily influenced by both historical and contemporary figures. Homi Bhabha and Edward Said, two still-active theorists whose pivotal works were written in latter half of the twentieth century, have shaped the contemporary understanding of these notions profoundly. Homi Bhabha’s discussion in his work *The Location of Culture* elucidates cultural hybridity as a “third space” that is created in the dichotomy of colonists and colonized that assumes dominance in the scholarship. Bhabha asserts that hybridized cultures have valid identities. He argues that cultural identity needs not be defined as ‘tainted’ or ‘untainted’. Instead, he says that in the process of hybridization or syncretism, new identities can be created that are still classifiable under the namesake of the ‘colonized’ culture in question.

Said’s discussion in his work *Orientalism* stresses the issues that exist with the Western classifications of “Oriental” (East Asian civilizations) and “Occidental” (Western civilizations). These terms essentially ‘other’-ize the non-European regions and peoples of the world. His reaction to these concepts contrasts starkly to the early twentieth century writings of Guizot, a French scholar who legitimized the historicity of the West by denying non-European countries entry into the sphere of history and claims to the term ‘civilization.”

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88 i.e., Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture* and Said’s *Orientalism.
89 Sakamoto 117.
that this West/non-West dichotomy is only capable of existing because it elevates one, namely “the West,” at the expense of the ‘other.’ This logic is also applicable to the situation of religious syncretism in Japan.

As shown in the second chapter, the Japanese government of the nineteenth century—Meiji—emphasized a historical dichotomy of Buddhism and Shintō. It fought zealously for Shintō, which it believed was the “colonized” system in the dichotomy. In the Meiji’s eyes, Buddhism’s historical dominance in Japanese politics had occurred because of the subjugation of Shintō. Its hegemony over indigenous practices was emphasized by the honji suijaku paradigm in its earliest stages.

Buddhist scholars of this phenomenon elevated the spiritual status Buddhist figures and demonized or lowered that of the kami in order to legitimize Buddhist ideas in the eyes of the people. The kami were systematically denied the singular reverence they previously received and sometimes consolidated with Buddhist figures. Artistic depictions of kami who underwent this process of conglomeration, or shinbutsu shūgō (神仏習合), were highly syncretic. They documented the evolution of a pantheon of beings whose identities extended throughout multiple communities of spiritual belief. Honji suijaku will be discussed further in the final section of this chapter.

**Modes of Syncretism**

Jacques H. Kamstra, one of the classic writers who wrote on the subject matter, declared that syncretism could occur both from outside of a religion, and from within. To him, syncretism involved the intermingling of elements of one belief system and “foreign” elements

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90 Sakamoto 121.
91 Ibid.
from various others. When syncretism occurred from “without” in his theory, “foreign” elements altered the religion being examined. The introduction of Taoism to early Japanese religion is an example of this. With the coming of Taoism, Japanese spirituality came to employ new forms of divination and to incorporate new ideas about the body/the gods within.92

Syncretism that occurred from within a religion in Kamstra’s theory was slightly more complex. In this case, elements within a religion would become foreign to it in the midst of its evolution. This very abstract notion is an explanation of how when religions change, some of their historical elements appear illogical to their changing constructions. However, it is important not to discount these internally “foreign” elements as nonsensical. Their differences from the main religion do not discredit them of their classification under its categorical term. In reality, these elements which do not seem bound to the “main” religion may just go on to create another strain of that religion. There is a danger of assuming religious purity in this part of Kamstra’s theory.

Recently, James Grayson has argued that there are two other ways of understanding how syncretism may occur. In the first way, which he names “high syncretism” or “reverse” syncretism, the “autochtonous” religion, or the religious practice that is native to a place, chooses to incorporate elements of the foreign religious system. Japanese Buddhism is an example of this type of syncretism. The second way in which Grayson says syncretism can occur is in the form of “low syncretism,” which is a process within which the foreign religion chooses to accommodate elements of the indigenous religion to its “core values.” This type falls more clearly under the general definition of syncretism. It is a selective process by which a foreign religion ensures its dominance in the society which it wishes to be part of. In the case of low

92 Shih-shan 2015.
syncretism, the foreign religion plays the part of the colonialist—accepting what suits it; denying what does not.

Grayson makes an example of Catholicism to explain low syncretism. Through the missionary efforts of innumerable individuals throughout history, the Catholic Church has managed to infiltrate many societies. In some cases, the missionary effort has resulted in violence. The peoples being “visited” by the Church, were subjugated, their religions deemed as blockages that would destroy their nations’ possibility of rebirth in heaven after death. Occurrences such as this would leave people forced to denounce their indigenous spiritual traditions, and assume the ideas promulgated by the Church as their own.

This is problematic for the obvious reason—its consequence is the near-absolute eradication of the spirituality which existed before the coming of the Church. In the case of those beliefs which were expressed visually through the creation of icons, this eradication was often a full-scale annihilation of abstract and material traditions, the result of which was a severing of historical spiritual beliefs and the people of latter generations. This is not to suggest that ancestral religious traditions would never have undergone any religious syncretism had it not been for their interactions with the Church. Religions, contrary to what is sometimes suggested, do not exist in vacuums. They are fluid and susceptible to gradual change.

As earlier stated, Grayson’s idea of reverse syncretism can be applied to the Japanese context. It may even be applied to Indian Buddhism. In the two stories about the Buddha’s birth related in Chapter 1, there are ideas that were particular to early Indian spiritual philosophy, such as that of spiritual liberation. Buddhism was the product of spiritual seeking, yes, but it was simultaneously and object that arose out of a particular culture. Ideas of karma and rebirth were already present in Indus Valley civilizations before the historical Buddha began to preach them.
One might even argue that these ideas were the foundation onto which he built his Buddhism. If that is the case, Buddhism is a syncretic religion from its outset. The result of this is that the series of variations on Buddhism, including those of the Japanese context, are in some way related to classical Indian thought.93

In order to demonstrate the nonexistence of the notion of “pure religion” using the Japanese example, an in-depth discussion of history, philosophy, religion, Japanese art—specifically the popular Edo Period (1600-1867) folk art tradition of Ōtsu-e—will be necessary. This is a highly interdisciplinary approach to the subject matter, but all aspects are necessary to a thorough explanation of syncretism, and the manner in which it has permeated Japanese society both historically and contemporarily.

IV. Buddhist-Shintō Syncretism in Japan

The historical development of Japanese Buddhism has been remarkably accommodating of outside influences. Even recently, in the nineteenth century, Japanese Buddhist monks, traveled abroad to India and Sri Lanka to experience the “original Buddhism.”94 By traveling to this region of the world and learning about Buddhism in its context, and subsequently returning to Japan with region-specific ideas, these monks furthered the syncretism within Japanese Buddhism.

However, in spite of Japan’s acceptance of these outside influences, the result has been a very fragmented Buddhism. Because of the fracturing of Buddhist thought in Japan, it is necessary to refer to Japanese Buddhism in the plural, as Japanese “Buddhisms.” The significance of this pluralization is the suggestion that it makes—they are all different. The

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93 The relations would reach even further back, into pre-classical India.
94 Jaffe 2004.
Buddhisms of Japan cannot be considered part of a unified tradition. Their divided existence is reflective of the overall fragmentation of Buddhism under the global umbrella; their disagreements with one another a reflection of the fragmentation caused by political aspects of their syncretism. The consequence of the introduction of Buddhism was a series of turbulent political situations which resulted in divisions within Japanese society—including deepened class and gender segregations. Both of these things are visible in the region’s visual culture.

One thing that is vital in the discussion of any kind of syncretism is the culture of words. Translation is a significant component of cross-cultural dialogue, as well as a key method by which one culture can absolutely confound their understanding of another’s ideas. Colonial discourse arguably persists even in the ‘post’colonial era, as scholars impose categories and vocabularies onto ‘non-western’ cultures. As earlier stated, the implication of this practice is that in order to have their ideas seen as legitimate within the dominant scholarship, these cultures are sometimes forced to recategorize their own ideas and discuss things in ways that may be unnatural in their respective languages.

This could be called this a third type of syncretism, wherein the hybridity in question exists in the sphere of language. As Charles Stewart expresses in his article regarding the terminology used in written and verbal investigations of syncretism, the history behind the words may have some bearing on how they are interpreted. Even the term “syncretism” has a dubious history, itself, having been given various definitions and connotations by the scholars and theologians who have employed it in their work.

It should be noted that this is not a phenomenon specific to Japanese Buddhisms. Rather, it is one that accompanies determinedly expansive soteriological religions such as the aforementioned Catholicism and Islam. Both of these religions have histories of conquest,
depredation, and subjugation of the autochtonous spiritual beliefs of the lands they have encountered. It is arguable that the conquistadorial histories of these religions are part of the reason why the term syncretism has a dubious reputation.

**Honji suijaku**

The syncretic combination of Japanese *kami* with Buddhist figures occurred over the course of several centuries. Mark Teeuwen and Fabio Rambelli explain that this happened in four phases, each just as complex as the last.95 The first step to amalgamation was taken upon Buddhism’s official introduction to Japan in the sixth century. When the religion was introduced, the Buddhas and bodhisattvas were taken to be foreign *kami* and were worshiped accordingly. They were thought to act in the same way as Japanese *kami*, with the only difference between them being their place of origin.

To create some of the worship spaces for Buddhist entities, monks fought against the general population for rights to trees that were in lands sacred to *kami*.96 This was their contribution to a discussion that coincided with the rapid expansion of the Yamato state, which needed more trees to build more structures throughout its domain. Some Buddhist temples were thus granted permissions to use these sacred trees in their construction. This demonstrates a use of architecture that is almost synonymous with spiritual mind control. The people would have known that these trees had sacred qualities, magical qualities. With that information, it would be difficult not to perceive temples built with *kami* trees as sacred sites.

In the seventh century, the creation of “shrine-temples” exemplified the second phase of the amalgamation, the anthropomorphizing of *kami*.97 These structures were built in order to

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95 Teeuwen and Rambelli, 7.
96 *Kami* were previously worshiped in natural locations like groves or forests. Their homes were marked off with ropes called *shimenawa* (Hardacre 417).
97 Teeuwen and Rambelli 9.
pacify *kami*, whose personalities could have violent consequences for the masses. The anthropomorphization of *kami*, the establishment of links between those *kami* and patrilineal *uji*, and an increase in Chinese-style mountain asceticism were all linked to this development. *Kami* would send oracles to mountain ascetics asking them to create temples at their shrines to help them to defeat their own karmic issues. According to the legends and oracles, these *kami* were only *kami* because the karma they had accrued in their previous lives prevented them from achieving liberation from samsara. 98 This is important for multiple reasons, to be discussed below.

Prior to this period, *kami* were not discussed in terms of human qualities. Though they could be vengeful or kind—as was evidenced by their deliverance of pestilences or fertile crops—, they were not considered to have other human qualities. This was made clear in their representations at shrines as rocks or other natural objects. It was after the official introduction of Buddhism that people began to depict these beings as humanoids. Given this new understanding of what *kami* looked like, it makes sense that there would be increased communications between humans and *kami* after their anthropomorphization. It is interesting that the human qualities these beings were imbued with extended to their spiritual condition, but again, it is sensible. The reason here is that some *kami*—in both the early and later periods—were actually human beings from the profane world who were given *kami* status. This could be done in honor of lifelong good deeds, or for the purpose of pacifying their potentially wrathful spirits after death.

As has been mentioned in earlier chapters, the combination of Buddhist and *kami* practices was eventually frowned upon. This extended to the concepts of ritual purity and cleanliness. Before completing important rituals, Buddhist ordinands were required to undergo a

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98 Teeuwen and Rambelli, 10.
type of ritual cleansing. Similarly, when it came to kami rituals, Shintō shrines made it a requirement for all Buddhist renunciants to leave the premises so that they did not contaminate the rituals. Moreover, any overlap between the time frame for conducting these rites and practicing Buddhist rites was prohibited. By mandating this separation, Shintō shrines were able to prevent angry outbursts from the kami who needed non-Buddhist attention. The imperial family is documented as having isolated kami rituals, Shintō rituals, for their use in ceremony.99 Ise Shrine is one of the earliest locations to have these purist imperial ceremonies, which spread in practice to shrines of different statuses.

In the Kamakura Period, honji suijaku changed significantly. Kami came to be differentiated, with some becoming classified as “real kami.”100 Real kami were the clan deities worshiped in Japan, which has a history of ancestor worship similar to China. Clan deities, also referred to as ujigami (氏神), are the deified spirits of deceased relatives which must be worshiped to prevent negative consequences for the family. In the cases of more powerful families such as the top uji and the imperial family, these ujigami have the potential to bring misfortune to more people than just the relatives who worship them. Stories of these malevolent spirits exist in the literature describing early Japan.

Honji suijaku also developed into a reverse form suggested by Buddhist officials during this period. This strain of the phenomenon, referred to as “(han) honji suijaku,” suggested that kami were originally enlightened beings. Moreover, these kami were original enlightened beings or, honji, that emerged directly from the supreme Buddha Dainichi. This figure was almost considered to be the cosmos itself, from which the kami of Japan, and the Japanese people

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99 Teeuwen and Rambelli, 22.
100 Ibid, 31.
themselves, who in some sects of Buddhism were also considered to be originally enlightened, emerged. Buddhas and bodhisattvas, in contrast to the *kami*, had to work toward enlightenment. This meant that they were only “traces” of *Dainichi*, also known as *suijaku*.

The complexity of this paradigm defines much of the discussion around the politics of deity worship in Japan. Its progression suggests a rivalry between Buddhism and Shintō throughout history. However, it should be noted that the theory of *honji suijaku* was circulated primarily in the elite spheres of society. The realities of religious belief and practice differed among the common people. They were affected more so by artistic and material culture, than by abstract theory.
Chapter 3: Religion and Syncretism in Japanese Art

Art in its most powerful forms memorializes the present day, either by portraying subject matter directly related to contemporaneity, or by portraying subject matters that remind viewers of the past. Religious art memorializes the religious beliefs, idealized figures and stories contemporary to a group of people at a given time. This chapter explores the manner in which religious art has memorialized the political and social atmospheres of religion in Japan throughout history. It will examine Buddhist art, and Shintō-Buddhist syncretic art, following the timeline of Japanese history. It should be noted that while syncretism is often directly visible in art, artworks are sometimes syncretistic not because of their aesthetic qualities, but because of the concepts that they represent.

This chapter’s examination of artworks will begin with the Nara Period of Japanese history (710-814 CE). Nara is the period that immediately follows the Asuka Period (552-645 CE), during which Buddhism is cited as having been officially “introduced” to Japan. During the Asuka period, Buddhist artworks were primarily imports from the Korean kingdom of Paekche, which formally shared Buddhism with the Yamato (Japanese) State. The small Buddhist statuaries given to the Japanese by the Paekche representatives in this period can be considered precursors to later developments in Japanese religious art. According to Donald McCallum, the oldest Buddhist statues to be found in Japan were actually directly from Korea, resulting in Korean influence on early Japanese Buddhist iconography.101

The Asuka and Nara periods are immediately followed by the Heian Period (794-1185), which is well-known for its plethora of artistic wonders and emphasis on Pure Land Buddhist teachings. Heian is also the period when Japanese Buddhist authorities began to consider the

honji suijaku paradigm discussed in Chapter 2. Part of this chapter will consider artworks that pertain to that specific concept of Buddhist-Shintō syncretism. It will subsequently transition into the Kamakura Period (1185-1333) and the much shorter Nanbokuchō Period (1333-1392), during which Pure Land Buddhism saw continued popularity. The paper will pass over the Muromachi Period (1392-1573) during which the Zen school flourished, in favor of the Edo Period (1573-1867). The Zen school, transferred to Japan from China, was syncretic from its outset\textsuperscript{102}, but as the discussion has centered on Pure Land, Tendai, and Shingon Buddhism, Zen artworks will not be examined.

Until the section concerning the Edo Period, all of the discussions will focus upon elite art. The reason for this is that there is a significantly smaller body of information concerning folk religious arts throughout Japanese history. Concern for folk traditions was only revived just recently, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In spite of this late revival, it is undeniable that the folk traditions of Japan played a significant role in the development and proliferation of Japanese religion. Folk arts are a visual representation of the common people’s perception of the religious environment in any place. Moreover, they serve as a testament to the true religious beliefs of a group of people; they represent religious beliefs influenced by, but unbounded by the limitations posed by the ruling elites. It is with this consideration of the importance of folk material and spiritual culture that the chapter will move into its concluding section about Ōtsu-e (大津絵) paintings, which are a form of Japanese folk art from the Edo Period.

\textsuperscript{102} Sharf 2002.
The Ōtsu-e take their name from the town of Ōtsu, although they were also made in some of the town’s surrounding villages, such as Oiwake and Otani. In their earliest days (at the start of the Edo Period), they were paintings made on inexpensive materials that represented the religious plurality of the time. This plurality is a prime example of syncretism in Japan on the popular level. Though Ōtsu-e have been given significantly less attention than other art forms in the scholarship on Japanese religious art, they are exemplars of the popular understanding of the multiplicitous nature of religion in Japan.

It should be emphasized here that although there are many types of Buddhist art in Japan, this paper is concerned primarily with the artistic developments of the Shingon, Tendai and Pure Land schools, which are arguably the most syncretic of the Japanese Buddhist traditions. Shingon and Tendai both incorporate profuse amounts of Japanese indigenous spiritual practices. Pure Land, which does not discourage worldliness, easily coincides with kami rituals designed for attaining worldly benefits. These three Buddhisms are also known for their inclusion of “magical” practices. ‘Magic,’ also spelled ‘magick,’ is a variable ritual process through which individuals believe they are able to affect their reality. The rituals involved in Shingon and Tendai especially are magical in nature, coinciding with the nature of pre-Buddhist religious rites in Japan. It is notably this aspect of these Buddhisms that receives the most criticism from outside sources for not being “Buddhist enough.”

This chapter will progress through Japan’s religious history via representative artworks, and finally conclude with the Edo Period (1600-1867), during which the Japanese state declared Buddhism to be the only religion of Japan.

103 Welch 7.
104 White 2017, 600.
105 Harvey 11.
I. Mandalas of the Ninth Century – Esoteric Buddhism in Nara

Mandalas are a type of Buddhist art that was imported into Japan with Buddhism. These artworks have been popularized across the Asia from India to Tibet, China and Japan.\(^{106}\) Moreover, they have historically been a popular way to represent Buddhist cosmology in these regions.

Mandalas can be created in two-dimensions as in the case of tapestries and esoteric Buddhist paintings, or in three-dimensions as in the Hindu-Buddhist syncretic temples built from the tenth to thirteenth century in the Khmer Kingdom (contemporary Cambodia). According to Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis, mandalas crafted in the second dimension are made with the intention that they will be pushed into the third dimension by practitioners who give them careful contemplation.\(^ {107}\) This occurs through the process of meditation, for which these diagrams serve as guides in the esoteric Buddhist traditions. They are also used in the Pure Land tradition as a means to visualize the Western Pure Land.

In either two or three-dimensional form, mandalas are representations of Buddhist cosmology that hold deified figures that represent of the absolute truth of the universe at their centers. In the immediate vicinity of these figures are others who represent other manifestations of this divine truth.\(^ {108}\) Ten Grotenhuis argues that mandalas are also representative of Buddhism’s sacred geography. Buddhist sacred geography includes a body of water and a sacred mountain known as Mount Meru in the scriptures. In the Khmer case, this explains the baray,
large artificial reservoirs of water, and the mountainous appearance of many of the syncretic
temple structures at Angkor.

Mandalas are created in varying degrees of abstraction. Some refer to the deities they
represent in anthropomorphic form; others refer to their deities through the symbolism of objects
that are used in ritual or Sanskrit symbols. It should be noted that because they are created with
Indian sutras as their bases, all mandalas have direct Indian origins. Some of the elements of
these sutras were Japanized, and hybrid sutras resulted in the Japanese context. This is similar to
the honji suijaku concept in that Indian concepts were given different meanings in the transfer of
these sutras and the development of Japanese mandalas. Though the style of the mandala may
differ between cultures, there are common themes among all in existence due to their ultimately
Indian origin.

The Taima Mandala

The Japanese Taima Mandala is a clear illustration of the Indian heritage of this art type.
Figure 2 is an example extant from the 14th century, near the end of the Kamakura Period. This
work resembles long classical Chinese painted scrolls created at this same point in time.
Everything in this painting, even the green roofs of the buildings that line its sides, has a gold
overtone. This may be due to age, but on the assumption that it was purposeful, it may be a
symbolic representation of the divine realm of Amida’s Pure Land. The mandala is divided into
seven different levels with each overseen by a particular Buddhist figure, shown at the side in a
vertical series of small portraits. These portraits appear to be separated from the general setting
of the work, which consists of a courtyard lined with multiple levels of gated halls. Buddhist
laity populate the open balconies of these halls, and dwell on the staircases, which connect the
seven levels of the work.
The central figure around which the painting revolves is the Buddha Amida. He sits at the center of the work flanked on either side by two attendants, a common layout for paintings that portray him. While Amida is dressed in the simple, relaxed attire of a Buddha, the two figures on either side of him are dressed much more extravagantly. Their proximity to him as the most important figure in the painting and their elaborate attire indicate that they are bodhisattvas. This is further evidenced by the halos surrounding their heads, which resemble that surrounding Amida’s.\(^{109}\)

Figure 3 is another example of the *Taima Mandala* that dates to the eighteenth century. The colours in this painting are far more opaque. The artist used red, green, and yellow as the main palette, making the Chinese influence—common with the earlier version—more apparent. This influence is also shown in the exaggerated curved roofs dispersed throughout the background of the work. One interesting difference between these two works is that the characters in the later version—all in relatively the same locations—have differing facial features. That is to say, the depictions of Buddhist figures in the eighteenth century *Taima Mandala* appear to have been inspired by South Asian facial features as opposed to those in the fourteenth century example, wherein the figures have East Asian facial features that are discernible even through the gold overtone of the painting.

The artist may have done this because the mandala in both of its forms was meant to resemble the description of Amida’s Pure Land provided in the *Muryōjukyō* (Skt. *Sukhāvatīvyūha*, long version) and *Amidakyō* (Skt. *Sukhāvatīvyūha*, shorter version) sutras, which explore the Pure Land teachings and the possibilities of otherworldly realms such as the

\(^{109}\) A number of other figures in mandala also have halos around their heads. They are interspersed throughout the work, with some positioned behind the main triad, and others existing as part of smaller triads or portraits in the vertical strip of divine figures at the right side of the overall painting. The halo is symbolic of divinity.
Western Pure Land. The usage of either facial characteristics in the creation of this mandala can be related to ideas of cultural/religious hybridity.

II. Sutra-copying in the early Heian Period

In the early Heian Period, the act of copying Buddhist sutras was believed to be a way to accrue merit towards a favorable rebirth. The words of these sutras were written on beautiful paper, some even sparkling with gold lacquers that emphasized their religious quality. The belief in the power of words was taken very seriously in the esoteric Buddhist traditions. This is made apparent in their stress on practitioners’ recitation of mantras as a means to achieve enlightenment. It is clear that in these traditions, words harbor divine energies, and when they are organized in specific fashions, the conditions of life or rebirth can be altered. Were this not the case, they would not be able to ferry practitioners to heavenly realms.

As noted in Chapter 2, the Heian Period was a part of Japanese history in which Buddhist esotericism had great influence. Sutra-copying is an art form that exemplifies the early state of this esotericism in relation to its emphasis on Word. It was an art form that was typically produced by the elites and monastics (male and female) of Japanese society. Figure 4 is an example of a copy of the *Lotus Sutra*. This sutra is a key component of the Mahāyāna sect of Buddhism, under which Japanese esoteric Buddhism is classified. This particular copy, which is decorated with illustrations of birds, leaves and flowers, consists of columns of neatly calligraphed Chinese characters of the sutra. The precision the author applied to the characters left no space for kinesthetic expression. Therefore, it can be assumed that the copy was made for serious purposes (i.e. for the purpose of accruing merit).

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110 Ten Grotenhuis 16.
111 Mason 2005.
The act of copying sutras served as a magical means by which practitioners of Buddhism could attain benefits both in this world and beyond.\textsuperscript{112} The act of writing is, in a multitude of religious cultures, a means of attaining special benefits from the other realms. The ancient Egyptians, for example, deified the Word, and held that words contained a power that could be used to alter the world of the individual. Writing a word, or a series of words, could be an act of spellcasting if that were the intent of the author. Even contemporary practitioners of magick, sometimes consider the act of writing to be a type of magick, with the physical engagement with words on paper being a method of performance.

The ancient Japanese placed a special emphasis on Word, in their pre-Buddhist religious practices. The oracles given by \textit{miko} (巫女), women who could interact with the spirit realms, can be taken as an example of this. In instances of oracle reception, \textit{miko} would serve as direct conduits through which beings in the other realms could speak. The words that the \textit{miko} spoke would come directly from another being in an act that can be most closely identified with spirit possession in the West, though without the same negative connotations. In this situation, whether the words were those of a deity or a vengeful spirit (goryō 御霊), they would be heard with a sense of awe, and understood as a representation of the power of the supernatural other. These words would be understood as auspicious in this context.

If words could be understood as powerful when the supernatural interacted with humanity, they could also be understood in the reverse, in a direction where humanity could use words to exert power over the supernatural. In the case of the early Japanese, the supernatural

\textsuperscript{112} White 2017.
extended to the natural realm in which humans reside. Kami, as earlier discussed, could be natural phenomena such as mountains, storms, trees and the like.

III. Syncretism in Kamakura Sculpture

The esoteric Buddhist sculpture of the Kamakura Period was syncretic not only in its aesthetic qualities, but also in its manner of use. Statues from this period have been discovered with various ritual items within them. These items range from relics, to scriptures and magical spells. These statues, in the words of Hank Glassman, have been “empowered” as elements of esoteric Buddhist ritual.

Sculptures from this era also conceptualize the philosophy of honji suijaku discussed in Chapter 2. Figure 5, Zen’en’s Standing Eleven Headed Kannon, is an example of a sculpture that does so. Kannon is an important figure in both Pure Land and Tendai Buddhism. This bodhisattva acts almost as the “patron saint” to some social groups, including women. Following the introduction and popularization of Christianity in Japan, he becomes associated with the Virgin Mary. This is evidenced in artistic depictions of him, such as in the Ōtsu-e to be discussed in the following section of this chapter.

This work is a male representation of Kannon, the Bodhisattva of Compassion (Skt. Avalokitesvara). He stands in an upright position that is straight, but relaxed. The gentleness of his stance is further emphasized by the soft, draping folds of his skirted robes, and the roundness

113 Glassman 29.
114 Though in his Indian form, this bodhisattva is often male, depictions of him in eastern Asia are often androgynous or female. Figure 9 is an example of a porcelain sculpture of his likeness from the Ming Dynasty (16th century). Here, Kannon is portrayed wearing a garment of soft, draping folds. His face is round, the top of his head covered slightly by his clothing. This is in contrast to other portrayals of the bodhisattva, in which his primary garment is strictly a lower-body covering. He stands on a finely sculpted cloud, his only jewelry a crown on the top of his head that peaks out from its fabric covering.
of his torso. Unlike some other Buddhist sculptures, this Kannon does not have defined musculature. Instead, his torso is very soft, with round forms composing each of its composite parts (i.e. the pectoral muscles, and rolls of the stomach). These features are markers of the figure’s status as a bodhisattva. Bodhisattvas are soon-to-be Buddhas that choose to reincarnate on the earthly plane in order to help facilitate the enlightenment of other beings. Unlike Buddhas, bodhisattvas are not required to relinquish all worldly pleasures. It is likely for this reason that they are often distinguished from Buddhas in sculpture by their extravagant clothing and headdresses.

Kōshun’s 1328 sculptural depiction of the deity Hachiman is another example of honji suijaku (Figure 6). In this statue, Hachiman, who is a figure originally belonging to the Shintō pantheon, is depicted as a Buddhist monk. Kazuo Kasahara explains that Hachiman was originally a Shintō deity, that was incorporated into the Buddhist pantheon. In the eleventh century, it was suggested this deity was an emanation of the Amida Buddha.115

Kōshun’s statue has a strong presence. He sits with a stiffly straight back, dressed in the robes of a Buddhist monk. Legend has it that Hachiman, after rejoicing at the adoption of Buddhism in the state, declared that a Buddhist temple should be erected in his name (a legend believed to have been created by Buddhist monks in order to elevate the status of Buddhism by means of the native deities). Given this legendary wish and his logical promotion of Buddhism, Kōshun has portrayed Hachiman in a meditative pose. His eyes, which are inlaid with crystals, burn into the ground before him, with the intensity of a deep stare weighted by absolute presence. The creation of statues such as this, which portrayed Shintō and Buddhism unequally,

115 Kasahara 2001, 144.
succeeded in altering perceptions of spirituality on the popular level. Spirituality and material culture operate in a give-and-take arrangement within which each is able to influence the other.

IV. “Fifty-three Views” of Religion in Ōtsu

Ōtsu-e serve as a testament to the long history of religious hybridity in Japan. Given the historical relationships between Japan, Korea, and China, they could also be argued to be exemplars of religious hybridity across the geographical region of East Asia. In Japan, these artworks represent that religious history, while simultaneously representing the history of conflict that has accompanied it. This conflict has appeared in politics, affecting government policy, and in the social environment of Japan, affecting popular ideas about religion.

Ōtsu-e paintings were created by laypeople without the guidance of monks or other religious authorities. This means that they could not capture the religious teachings of the elite classes contemporary to their times. However, they could capture the religious beliefs that were contemporary to average Japanese people. Some Ōtsu-e, as an example, portray a figure called “Koshin” (Shomen Kongo; Figure 7). This figure is a conglomeration of ideas from three different religious traditions—Taoism, Buddhism, and Shintō—that are all interacting on the same plane of abstraction.

It should be noted that the themes of Ōtsu-e, following their earliest existence, extended beyond the realm of religious beliefs. Ōtsu-e are markers of Japanese culture as it changed over the years, and as such, they are exemplars of cultural syncretism in other realms of culture, such as theatre and oral history. In some cases, they also functioned as an unregulated means by

116 The famous woodblock print (ukiyo-e) artist Utagawa Hiroshige has a series of prints titled 53 Stations at Tokaido in which he depicts one station as Ōtsu, the town that Ōtsu-e came from.

117 McArthur 17.

118 Ibid 19.
which artists could make political statements.\textsuperscript{119} Some of these artworks—which, notably, did not only depict supernatural beings—satirized the political conditions of the Edo period, which was controlled by the repressive mandates of the Tokugawa regime.\textsuperscript{120}

Figure 8 is an example of an Ōtsu-e that depicts Fukurokuju, the god of longevity. In his explanation of this artwork, McArthur emphasizes the human characteristics assigned to the god, in this case that of vanity specifically.\textsuperscript{121} Fukurokuju is painted having a haircut. It is pictures such as these which encapsulate the purpose served by much of the Ōtsu-e tradition: to bring the otherworld into the reach of the common people.

The Shichi fukujin are folk deities who are actually not of Japanese descent. They are deities whose origins lie in China—specifically in the Taoist tradition—which, as has been demonstrated, was the source of a great many things for the early Japanese. Their veneration in Japanese folk religion is another example of syncretism. Though they were depicted humorously in Ōtsu-e, these figures were still expected to provide worldly benefits such as wealth and well-being to the common people. That people took them seriously, and incorporated them into their religious practice, demonstrated a syncretic relationship between the folk cultures of Japan and China on the level of non-institutionalized belief.

Ōtsu-e were painted on long, scroll like pieces of paper that resembled those used for their more expensive, elite-made counterparts. In some cases, in order to mimic more expensive paintings which were mounted onto silk screens, the creator of an Ōtsu-e would paint a border around the image for sale. Interestingly, Ōtsu-e do not strictly depict one specific subject matter,

\textsuperscript{119} Reider 2010.
\textsuperscript{120} McArthur 26.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid 27.
or religious belief. These artworks portray a range of things, even including actors popular during the Edo Period.

They are also fine exemplars of indigenous Japanese belief. Their playful promotion of folk culture over foreign influence makes them seem more likely to be a means by which the Japanese folk beliefs were able to counter the foreign religions which were present in Japan. The *Demon Converted to Buddhism (oni no nenbutsu)* in Figure 10 is one example of this. Created in what Yanagi Soetsu, the proponent of the theory of Japanese folk art (*mingei* 民芸), would deem the true fashion of Ōtsu-e, this image lacks the signature of its artist. It pictures a singular subject with no background except for the beige colored parchment the *oni* rests upon. The subject, an *oni* dressed in the garb of a Buddhist monk, holds a gong, a device for striking it, and a calligraphed paper charm.

This image is one of several that portray the same subject matter in almost the exact same way. The singular *oni*-monk figure is painted, for example, in Figure 11, with the same accessories, but just a slightly different face. This is evidence of the popular quality of this image, something universal across all of the subject matter of Ōtsu-e. The reason for this universality is that these artworks were sold as products to travelers along the Tōkaido highway. They commodified elements of folk culture, elements of the popular psyche, and were sold to help their artists accrue income. It is only logical that if such a symbol as this demon, mendicant monk was popular, artists would reproduce it to improve their sales. Their sales aside, the buying and selling of these images is suggestive of a much deeper phenomenon—that of cultural exchange and consequential variation.

Early Ōtsu-e often display the syncretic qualities of Pure Land Buddhism while later ones like figure 11 display the overarching syncretic qualities developed by Buddhism in Japan.
This demon figure is dressed as a Buddhist monk. He carries the same items as the oni in Figure 10 and has an equally disheveled appearance. His loosely hanging robe does not appear to be ill-fitting, it is just not modestly tied. Moreover, his hair is wild, a quality not allowed on the countenance of any Buddhist renunciant. Though the appearance of this demon is an obvious play on that of Buddhist monks, perhaps it is also to the appearance of yamabushi (spiritual “mountain men”).

Images such as Figure 10 and Figure 11 are important for a number of reasons. For one, the inscriptions on the scrolls carried by the demons in these images have a variety of meanings. Meher McArthur states that “some [of the inscriptions] warn against the superficial appearance of goodness, while others suggest that even the evilest of beings can be saved by Buddhism.”122 The multiple guises of the oni no nenbutsu are testament to the multitude of artists creating this specific Ōtsu-e, but it can simultaneously—in accordance with McArthur’s statement—be interpreted as the many faces of evil. The rampant corruption in pre-modern Japanese Buddhism which was a result of its close ties to government and politics was not the fault of one individual, but many. As such, if the oni no nenbutsu motif is to be analysed in terms of the “superficial appearance of goodness,” its multiplicity must be understood as the portrayal of various corrupt Buddhist officiants.

V. Christian Influences in Ōtsu-e

Figure 12 is an example of a late sixteenth-century Ōtsu-e that depicts the Amitābha Buddha. The tool-centric technique used to quickly reproduce Ōtsu-e is noticeable in this piece. One can tell by quick observance that the halo is a perfect circle, and the rays that emanate from it are perfectly straight. Early Ōtsu-e paintings often needed to be done in haste, so artists

122 McArthur 30.
developed “shortcuts” to creating originals and accurate reproductions.\textsuperscript{123} They used rulers to create straight lines, and compasses to create mathematically accurate circles.\textsuperscript{124}

Many things are syncretic about this artwork. The first and most important syncretic aspect of this work is the fact that it depicts a religious figure in a humanoid form. Historical though this argument may be, it is not irrelevant. Prior to the “transmission” of Buddhism to Japan, spiritual figures were not depicted in human form. It was Buddhism, specifically, that encouraged Japan to create humanized representations of gods, goddesses, and spiritual teachers instead of displaying them aniconically. Though aniconism was the standard for representing the Buddha in early India, it soon became customary to represent him in human form. Anthropomorphic statues of the Buddha were popularized and recreated in the countries that Buddhism traveled to.

The second syncretic aspect of the work is the halo that appears around the Amida Buddha’s head. It is no mistake that this halo, along with the posture of Amida, resemble depictions of Christian figures in European art. Christianity had come to Japan through Jesuit missionaries in 1542, not long before the Edo Period. It was outlawed during that time period, known as Muromachi (1336-1573 CE), and further restricted in by the Tokugawa regime (shogunate) of the Edo Period, but still thrived in secret among the faithful masses. Under its third shogun, or ruler, Tokugawa Iemitsu, the regime sought to destroy Christianity.\textsuperscript{125} The Christian religion, according to this government, did not acknowledge the “absolute authority” of the government, which had been formally legitimized by Buddhist institutions that were complicit in deifying the men of the Tokugawa shogunate. Though these institutions chose to

\textsuperscript{123} McArthur 16. 
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid 17. 
\textsuperscript{125} Thal 2002, 383.
agree with the shogunate for the sake of their continued survival, the Japanese government saw them as an ally against Christianity’s subversive threat against their religio-political legitimacy.

They forced “former” adherents to the religion to relinquish their faith and assume Buddhist practices, then to prove their allegiance to Buddhism. All citizens under the regime had to register in the danka-temple system, which was quickly misused by the temple system to mandate donations from members of the danka to support their continued existence.\(^{126}\) The government placed all faith in Buddhism and denounced Christianity to the point where it even felt inclined to force Christians to walk on Christian icons.\(^{127}\)

It is evident that the Edo period was not a hospitable time for Christians in Japan. The harsh suppression of their faith by the Edo government left them with few places to turn, thus leading to the birth of Christian-esque Ōtsu-e. These little artworks reveal more about the civilian experience than do their “high-class” contemporaries. Moreover, their popularity—indicated by their discovery throughout the whole of Japan—makes it clear that this experience was not concentrated in the area of the Tokaido highway, where they were sold. Christian suppression was experienced across Japan, hence the reason that Ōtsu-e artists were able to sell multiple copies of these Christian-Buddhist paintings. The fact that these artworks were produced by laity, not by ordained monks who were expected to paint in a particular fashion, is a further testament to their representation of common experiences.\(^{128}\)

The Christian symbolism in these Buddhist paintings is a surface-level hybridity. It is a visual syncretism that serves as a beacon for passing Christians who were mandated to perform rituals or holiday observances at Buddhist temples by the danka.\(^{129}\) Figure 8, earlier explained as

\(^{126}\) Covell 24.
\(^{127}\) McArthur 17.
\(^{128}\) Ibid.
\(^{129}\) Covell 25.
an abstract representation of Buddhist, Taoist, and Shintō ideas, has a halo around the main figure. This figure is also the center of a triadic arrangement. The number three is as an important a number in Christianity, where it refers to the holy Trinity, as it is in Buddhism, where it refers to the Three Treasures of the Buddha, the Dharma (his teachings), and the Sangha (the community of Buddhists). Given these associations and the link between the artwork and Taoism/Shintō, this painting can be said to have a triadic meaning. It means something different for each religious group, and portrays their syncretic overlap, which is the result of both gradual combination and forced political change.

The next quality that conveys the syncretistic nature of this piece, is a metaphysical one. The very fact that an Ōtsu-e artist would go through the trouble of creating such a seriously painted—considering the composition and the style of the elements earlier described—representation of the Buddha, illuminates the position that Buddha must have held in the tree of Japanese spirituality.

This motif, moreover, of a single Buddhist figure with a halo behind, is not a new one. It is one that had previously made appearances in the artworks of the higher classes because of its general popularity in Buddhist art. The orientation of the rays and halo behind the figure in this image, emphasize his importance. It is clear that regardless of the position that such a figure may have held in Japan previously, at this point in time (the 17th century), his importance to the religious culture of Japan was deep and undeniable.

Thirdly, the purpose of such a figure and such a painting must be considered. The usage of faith-based methods in the medical practices of the age also evidences a syncretistic aspect of the culture. Amitābha Buddha, to whom figures such as the oni in Figures 10 and 11 pray, is a figure who people believe will transport believers to his Western Pure Land no matter their rank
in society, so long as they devotedly chant the nenbutsu, a prayer-mantra-incantation hybrid specially designed to capture his attention. In Pure Land practices, this incantation is actually Amitābha’s name.

Here, the relationship between esoteric Buddhist practices and verbal invocations should be noted. As earlier stated, a magical quality was assumed of the words used in practice and the names of religious figures. This belief in magic is one that was present in pre-Buddhist spiritual belief in Japan. Consequently, this incorporation of magic in Japanese Buddhism is further evidence of syncretism. It is evidence of the hybrid nature of the religious interactions between Buddhism and Shintō.
Conclusion

I. Buddhism vs. Shintō?

From the information presented here, the complexity of Japan’s religious history must be clear. This complexity, which is often left unexplained in discussions about Buddhism and Shintō, suggests that the Meiji’s attempt to separate the two could never have been successful. Though it may have been possible to establish a superficial means of faith/belief organization, it was never possible to separate these two “different” faith-belief systems at their core states of abstraction.

All religions, all ideas furthermore, exist on a plane of abstraction. It is there that they are able to grow, nurtured by the thoughts and debates of the minds that devise and explore them. “Shintō”—with its variety of forms—and Buddhism, with its largely divided religio-philosophical manner of existence, both have grown and interacted with one another on this plane. On the physical plane, their existence is grounded in the practices of human beings. Moreover, so are their interactions. These two “separate” religions are therefore essentially tangled. This is the result of the long history and integration of Buddhism in Japan hitherto described.

Considering the relationship between Buddhism and Shintō, it seems impossible to declare the two as separate entities in the Japanese context. Shintō deities become “buddhized” in the late Nara Period, as in the statue of Hachiman described in Chapter 3. Shintō shrines become the homes of Buddhist statuaries in the Heian period; as described in the discussion on honji suijaku in Chapter 2. More examples than these work as physical reminders of the dual-interpretations that have existed for both Buddhist and Shintō ideas throughout Japanese history. The inextricable quality of the two religions, their asymmetrical mirror reflections within which
differences reflect similarities emphatically denote their structural lack of separateness. This is a structure that began to evolve when Buddhism was first introduced to Japan by immigrants from the continent so many centuries ago.

This process of conflation between Buddhism and indigenous beliefs, is a habitual action taken by Buddhism when it enters a different cultural realm on the plane of abstraction. That is to say, Buddhism’s propensity for integration is evidenced in cultural contexts other to the Japanese as well, where it has enmeshed itself in those cultures’ spiritual beliefs, and ideas of sacrality. In Tibet, for example, Buddhism was combined with the shamanistic religion of Bon. The Asia Society Museum of New York City has recently developed an exhibit which chronicles some elements of this. The exhibit, titled Unknown Tibet: The Tucci Expeditions and Buddhist Painting, categorizes its paintings according to the Three Treasures of Buddhism, and the components of Tibetan religion that combine to create the Tibetan Buddhist system.

The first section of the exhibition centralizes around the Buddha; the second, the Dharma; the third, the Sangha. Sections four and five are concerned with the Tibetan Lamas and the so-called “Path of the Tantra.” The exhibit demonstrates the manner in which Tibetan Buddhist art, similarly to Japanese Buddhist art, displays the complex interactions between Bon and Buddhism. According to the exhibit, Buddhism followed a similar progression of introduction and entanglement in Tibetan society.

As earlier mentioned, Buddhism also historically blends with the religious culture of the Khmer kingdom, as mentioned in the discussion about mandalas. Its ability to combine with what appear to be contradictory faiths can be attributed to its philosophical nature. However, it can also be attributed to the fundamentally hybrid nature of religious belief. The beliefs of one group of people in relation to the supernatural and its effects on everyday life, are constantly
influenced by the ideas of other, local groups of people. This can happen peacefully, through conversation and the sharing of ideas, or violently, as in situations where one group imposes a religious hegemony over the other. In the case of Japanese Buddhism, the initial amalgamation was the consequence of peaceful interactions in both the common and diplomatic spheres. The development of early Shintō (kami cults) is less clear because of the lack of historical information. However, it is probable that some aspects of Shintō belief and practice evolved as a result of early, protohistoric relationships between the peoples of Japan and Korea.

Therefore, the Meiji’s efforts to draw a sharp fence around Shintō, blocking it off from Buddhism and other “foreign” beliefs—in spite of the unavoidable Japanization of any and all spiritual beliefs that were introduced to Japan—could only have been unsuccessful. Both of the examples discussed here have shown the capacity for Buddhism to adapt itself to any religious system. Even in the contemporary age, Buddhism is described as a set of beliefs that can be utilized by any person no matter their religious affiliation. Being Christian, Muslim, or Pagan does not limit a person’s ability to apply the dharma to their daily life.130 Though some may encounter philosophical conflicts between their paths and the Middle Way, the dharma can still be utilized in some ways because rather than a religion, it acts as an approach to everyday life.

Some religions demand that adherents maintain integrity in both their philosophical and practical activities. However, as this research has shown, even in places where the lines appear to be sharply drawn, the boundaries between religions are not so clear. Instead, they are blurred, indistinct. It is important to remember the dual purpose of demarcating lines: though they may separate one place from another, they always serve as locations of intersect. The boundaries

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130 This is emphasized by contemporary Buddhist figures such as Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese monk of the Mahāyāna sect.
between religions are therefore permeable lines, through which things will pass, noticed or otherwise.

In the case of Shintō, the Meiji attempted to create a religion for the populace in a manner similar to their premodern ancestors, who created historical records that employed mytho-historical stories which legitimized the reign of the royals. One of these records, called the Kojiki, asserts that the sovereigns of Yamato, of early Japan, were legitimate rulers because their ancestry could be traced to the divine primordial couple Izanagi no Mikoto and Izanami no Mikoto. This god and goddess had humanlike qualities; their procreation resulted in the birth of various deities and natural phenomena.

When the early Japanese government published this myth in national history, they used religion as a means to control the people. The association of the imperials with the creation myth—whether believed by the common people or not—was an attempt to create a narrative in which religion was unchangeably tied to the sovereign, and thus made subject to his or her reign. As religion is also, in the general human psyche, one of the most intimate of phenomena, if accepted this narrative would have been highly influential in the sphere of the common people. However, it was also influential in the political sphere. The early Japanese government utilized religion, in the form of Buddhism, yin-yang spirituality, and “Shintō,” in many of its activities. The writing of the Kojiki and Nihon Shoki are examples of it utilizing indigenous beliefs to push its agenda.

The Meiji’s creation of “Shintō,” and its utilization of indigenous practices for government means served a similar purpose as the premodern literary equivalent. While the early

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131 Examples include the Nihon Shoki described in Chapter 3, and the Kojiki, which was created during the same period of time.
Japanese utilized beliefs already in place to solidify their reign, the Meiji regime codified those beliefs under a singular term, Shintō, and pushed them as a national religion. The Meiji also, in contrast to their predecessors, created this religion in a direct response against the prior hegemony of Buddhism that was evident even during the early period when the *Nihon Shoki* and *Kojiki* were written. Yet, their usage of Shintō in imperial ritual and their employment of indigenous practices for political gain, still acted as the staff through which they could reach into the common land and attempt to control the minds of the general populace.

In spite of the Meiji’s emphatic promotion of Shintō, Buddhism still persisted in the minds of their subjects. The preceding Tokugawa regime, which disallowed non-Buddhist religious practices, had made a deep impression on Japanese society that could not so easily be undone. The result of this push and pull between Buddhism and Shintō by the Tokugawa and Meiji regimes was what is now seen as an “ambiguity” of Japanese religion.

Rather than there being singular, monolithic religions fenced within the boundaries of sanctified terms like “Buddhism” and “Shintō,” in Japan, there exists an immensely complex web of belief and practice. Rather than sharp boundaries between faiths, there is a network of overlap and interconnection between the religious affiliations claimed by individuals. Even for those individuals who claim no affiliation, there is a complex and variant collection of spiritual practices, “folk” practices, that they perform at specific points in the calendar or life cycle. The *Ôtsu-e*, as visual representations of interfaith dialogue on the abstract plane, describe this network—for both the religious and non-religious—symbolically. They asserted the complexity of Japanese religious belief prior to the Meiji period and after, upon their study and recreation by post-Edo period artists.133

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II. Ōtsu-e in Contemporaneity

The question of the relevance of this project is a pertinent one. What are the lasting impacts of religious hybridity in Japan? And, how does this history of Buddhist acculturation manifest itself in contemporary Japan?

Ōtsu-e are one of the most recognizably influential agents on contemporary Japanese pop culture. The tradition lasted into the nineteenth century, due to artists’ interest in the preservation of cultural heritage. Modern forms of the Demon Dressed as a Buddhist Monk images are evidence of the tradition’s lasting influence. For example, “Inuyasha,” a popular anime (animated television show) from the 1990s has a plethora of characters whose appearance recalls these Ōtsu-e.134

The main character, named “Inuyasha,” is a demon who dresses in the same robes, though this may be more closely related to the attire worn in the period of time within which the anime is set. One of his close friends, a human monk named “Miroku,” embodies the corruption that these Ōtsu-e beckon to. He abuses his appearance as a monk for to acquire material gains from unsuspecting people. “Inuyasha’s” Miroku is able to represent the corruption through his multi-faceted character. Miroku is the name allotted to the Bodhisattva Maitreya in the Japanese language. In the Mahayana traditions, Maitreya is believed to be the “Buddha of the Future” who will teach the dharma after Buddhism has become “extinct” in the earthly realm.135

The appearance of the theme of monastic corruption in this contemporary context is representative of the lasting effects of Shintō-Buddhist syncretism. Clearly, if their syncretism has manifested in the work of contemporary animators, it is a prominent aspect of the Japanese religious landscape. Outside of popular animation, there are a handful of contemporary artists

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134 *Anime* can also refer to films.
135 Harvey 15.
whose work also gestures toward ideas of historical religion. The popular Mariko Mori is one such artist.

Some of Mori’s video installations, though reminiscent of the religious past, are futuristic. They “keeps with the times” in their usage of technology. She often features in these artworks herself, wearing costumes that give her a supernatural or futuristic appearance. In spite of this, Mori’s installations—at least those related to Buddhism—cross through time. Her titles evoke the memory of the past, of times where certain religious phenomena were alive and well. By recalling the memory of the religious past, but still utilizing the wonders of modern technology, Mori’s work is able to pay homage to the cultural past under the guise of contemporaneity.

One of Mori’s more directly Buddhist artworks is titled *Nirvāṇa* (Figure 13). According to Carol Eliel, this artwork “takes the five elements according to Buddhism—wind, fire, earth, and empty space—and creates a futuristic concept of nirvana.”¹³⁶ Her willful combination of elemental symbolism and Buddhist belief, suggests an openness to conceptual hybridization. This is confirmed in her practice of “[exploring] the beliefs of various civilizations, (including Mayan, Greek, Indian, and Chinese as well as Japanese) seeking common cultural ideas that could apply to the future as much as the past.”¹³⁷ This demonstrates that Mori is an example of a contemporary figure that embraces certain themes of Ōitsu-e, namely cultural combinations in religion and art. Her example is but one, yet it still resounds with the centuries of history of religion pluralism in Japan.

¹³⁶ Eliel 28.
¹³⁷ Ibid, 29.
III. Buddhism ‘and’ Shintō

The question asked in the title of the first section of this conclusion is therefore answered by the history of Japanese religion. “Buddhism versus Shintō” serves as a political mask for the truth of “Buddhism and Shintō.” This is a truth in which the two co-exist, borrowing elements from one another to enrich themselves and the lives of their practitioners, engaging both and compromising none. Japanese history has shown the capacity of Buddhism to exist within indigenous spiritual traditions, to integrate itself into a society as itself, but new.

This study has exposed the applicability of Homi Bhabha’s “difference of the same” in terms of Buddhism in Japan. Buddhism is introduced to Japan as something new, something different from what the sutras claim it originally was during the life of the buddha Siddhartha Gautama. Moreover, Buddhism, in this new form, continued to change until it assumed a form that was unique to Japan. The same happened with Christianity upon its integration into Japan, a topic which needs be examined in a later study.

The theoretical combination of these “different” systems of religious belief is only further elucidated by the art historical developments in Japanese religious history. The various instances of religious art that portray a place of overlap rather than insularity are testament to the reality of religion in Japan: integration rather than separation. This religious art history is a memento for the actual religious beliefs of the masses, rather than just the elite few, whose understanding of Buddhism, Christianity and Shintō differed. This difference lay in their ability to study religion on a level apart from the common people because of their privileges of education and access to the upper spheres of society.

Ōtsu-e are exemplars of a theme that has persisted throughout Japanese history from the coming of Buddhism, to its persecution and the contemporary age. It is hoped that this study has
been able to illuminate the prevalence of that theme and furthermore, supported the validity of Japanese religious practices in the face of scholarly—and popular—criticism. Here, it is hoped, that the dichotomy of Buddhism and Shintō stressed during the Meiji Period has been demonstrated to be false. The complexity of Japanese religious history, the plural, integrative nature of Japanese religion, disallows such a distinction to be made. Yet, it must be remembered that even in spite of this extensive hybridity, Japanese religion should not be denied its legitimacy.
Bibliography


Illustrations

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Figure 7: Unknown Artist. *Shomen Kongo*, Edo Period. Japan. (Museum of Fine Arts)
Figure 8: Unknown Artist. Ōtsu-e, Fukurokuju, Edo Period. Japan. (Mingeikan)
Figure 9: Unknown Artist. *White-glazed Statue of Avalokiteshvara*. Ming Dynasty, China. (Shanghai Museum)
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Figure 13: Mariko Mori, *Nirvana*. Video Installation, 1997. (ArtImage)